



Ai No Kusabi ***The Space Between***

Vol.
8

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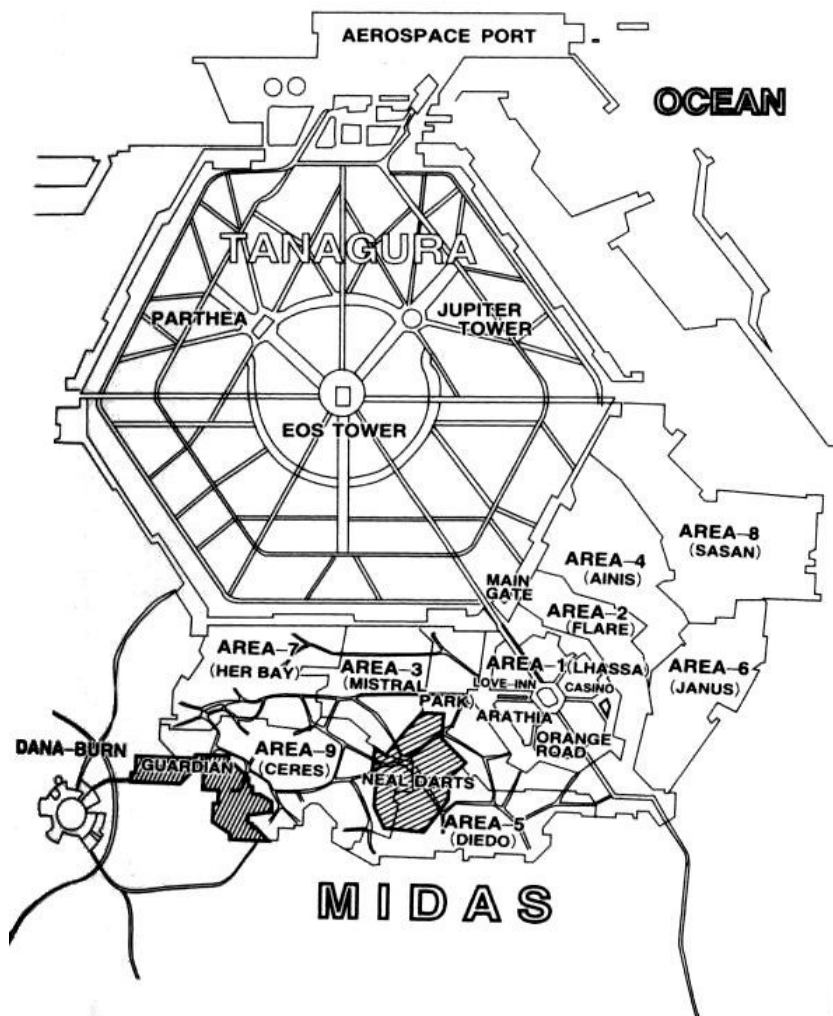
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The Space Between

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Prologue

The pleasure city of Midas.

Where every manner of dreams and desires comes to life.

On navigational charts the world of Amoy lies on the far edge of the Salinas Galaxy. Under the rule of Tanagura, Amoy is a resort world only for those with the time and wealth to partake of its delights.

It is the norm for entry visas to Midas to be reserved months in advance, available only to the select few. For a commoner, it is a prize ever beyond reach.

For such a visa, a full biometric analysis is an absolute requirement where attempts at bribery, threats or coercion have no say. Everyone waits their turn without exception.

For the privileged, an entry visa to Midas is more than just prestigious; it is an irreplaceable mark of status.

Midas itself accommodated every manner of human vice, irrespective of race, gender, religion or sexual deviancy, so long as they did not contravene the laws of Tanagura. Midas accepted the presence of everything without question—everything, except one place.

Area 9, Ceres.

In the distant past Ceres was full of idealism and the belief in a better future; nothing of that remained. As far as Midas was concerned, Ceres did not exist: not on official maps, not in any state recognition. Ceres was a vast ghetto where no one possessed identification of any kind, and men outnumbered women 9 to 1.

In a corner of this ghetto was where the former members of the

now-defunct gang Bison hung out, in a tuning shop customizing aerobikes for the street and motocross circuits.

Customized, battle-scarred aerobikes were the ride of choice in gang warfare; expensive, pristine factory machines had no place in Ceres other than to be stolen for parts.

Kirie once flaunted the ultimate status symbol in Ceres—the aerocar—but even he feared theft to the point where he paid an extortionate sum for a fully armed parking garage. That Kirie didn't blink at paying for such a luxury was no doubt a reflection of his ego in owning something that screamed "status symbol" on the streets of Ceres.

That the members of Bison would end up running a tuning shop after the disbandment of the gang was owed to Norris, or rather Norris's partner—Maxie.

Maxie—with his gigantic physique, his 3 o'clock shadow and aura of sensuousness so out of place with his rugged exterior—just so happened to be a mechanical genius. Heaps of rare and top-flight parts lay about everywhere in the shop.

Of course, those parts came with a price.

To Norris chagrin, Maxie drew a very thick line between business and pleasure. Accusations of being a skinflint or uncaring did not bother Maxie in the least; business was business, and Maxie cut no favors. Norris was infatuated with this hard-edged all-business side of Maxie, though he would rather die than admit as much. But anyone familiar with the relationship between the two could discern it was about more than just the sex.

It was nearly sunset when Norris walked into Kelly's hangout.

Norris walking around in grease-covered overalls... was a distant possibility even in a tuning shop where everyone had a skill set put to use, but after Riki's disappearance everyone was downcast.

"Took your sweet time, didn't you, Norris?" said Sid laconically.

Norris reached into the cooler and pulled out a bottle of carbonated alcohol.

"Yeah, there was word on something out in the street and I had to go check." With those words Norris eased himself into his usual reclining chair.

"Word on what?" Luke said with a raised eyebrow. "Probably something to do with Kirie again, right?"

Ever since Midas Security Forces launched their massive unprecedented raid into Ceres, rumors about Kirie on the streets of Ceres were endless. Even rival gangs put aside differences to unite in hatred and loathing of Kirie; it was the one thing the fractious denizens of Ceres could all agree on without reservation.

Once the illusion of being outside the law was shattered, nothing was ever the same in Ceres.

With Riki having disappeared again, Guy and the others found themselves in a precarious state. While they weren't the root cause of the raid, the streets of Ceres considered their involvement undeniable.

Though nothing could be further from the truth it was impossible to quell the rumors. Not that it caused anyone who used to be in Bison any lack of sleep.

Norris took a swig off his bottle. "No, not Kirie." He glanced at Guy. "Riki."

The room went quiet.

"Riki... what?" Guy breathed. Luke and Sid froze.

"Word on the street is that a pack joyriding into Midas saw Riki in Area 1." It was only recently that the practice of riding into Midas for thrills had revived. In the claustrophobic confines of Ceres, it wasn't just a matter of status and prestige to test riding skill against the Midas Security Forces, but one of the only ways to feel alive.

"Are you serious?" Sid gasped.

"It has to be bullshit." Luke narrowed his eyes. Whether it was about Kirie or Riki, there was no end to the rumors. The bars and alleys of Ceres thrived them. It was those who weren't around when Bison ruled the streets that paid them the most heed."

"Where in Area 1?"

"Apatia."

Guy rocked back in his seat, speechless.

If it was Mamia or Hades where rental rooms for liaisons abounded—it would probably end as some crude and twisted joke. But that was not the case.

"Apatia... *that* Apatia?" Luke said disbelievingly.

"Yeah. The residential area for the very, very elite."

While no one could be certain of it, it was understood that Apatia was where the privileged of Tanagura kept their lovers.

It was entirely too farfetched—but no one could dismiss the possibility. Anything was possible—but was it just another rumor? A case of mistaken identity? Could it be the truth? In the slums of Ceres, there was no way to know.

"Are you sure of it?" Guy's voice carried the promise of anger.

"I don't know. The punks say they're positive."

"Which punks?"

"Cyrus and his crew."

"The redhead and brunet duo?"

"Yeah."

"Then it's not for certain."

"... *Maybe*." Norris whispered.

There were too many questions left unanswered by Riki's disappearance, too many loose ends. Riki's connection to Katze—a power to be reckoned with in the underworld—could not be discounted either.

Things were easier in the past. No matter what they bitched about, no matter what came out of their mouths true or not, it wasn't a matter of life or death. Now it was. Even drunk, they had to watch what they said.

There was fear; palpable visceral fear. They knew secrets that went beyond anything they ever understood to be real in Ceres. Secrets that meant trouble—or worse. It meant they ceased to set foot in the bars they'd frequented and avoided being out in the open whenever possible.

The truth about the Guardians was beyond the pale, but there was no way to deny what Zico of Nier Darts had told them. The truth about Kirie... there were unexplained questions on exactly how he brought down the raid by the Midas Security Forces on Ceres, answers Kirie was not there to provide. The possibility of Riki having those answers was very real. It was agonizing to think of it.

There was no way to undo the past; no way to unlearn the truth, no way to pretend none of it meant anything.

So what could be done? What were the options?

Guy and the others had no answers.

The city that never sleeps.

That was Midas, and it was never more evident than at night.

Extravagant lights washed over its streets; from the exquisite to the merely lewd, they beckoned at passersby and promised pleasures beyond imagining.

Lies and truth.

The erotic and the grotesque.

Beauty and filth.

It all came together in Midas, flowing seamlessly into a vast deluge of artificial light.

"*Erogenous*," Riki whispered by the window.

The view of Midas from the heights of Eos captivated the eyes; from this window in Apatia, it screamed at the senses. The illumination itself was a narcotic.

But Riki knew better—that everything as far as the eye could see, even Ceres, was nothing but a vast eugenics farm for Tanagura. The residents of Midas lived their lives in perfect order. In contrast to the total freedom and total claustrophobia that blighted Ceres, those in Midas exchanged their freedom for an existence reduced to that of drones—not that anyone in Midas would consider their secure lifestyles as such.

A sex slave in Eos.

A slumdog in Ceres.

A drone in Midas.

It was hard to say which was the least degrading of all these fates.

Riki remembered when he threatened to bluff his way out of Iason's control in the slums; not that he had any such means. All Iason did was laugh mockingly.

Even in truth there were always hidden meanings. To be aware of the truth and to be able to use it for advantage were entirely distinct from one another; Riki knew from his experiences in dealing with Iason that the truth was infinitely flexible.

Was it right? Or wrong? Riki had no answers. All he knew was that truth was a matter of perspective.

Not knowing means not hurting.

Riki silently voiced the thought and stepped away from the window. With a touch of his hand, he enabled the visor mode on the window and dimmed the luminescence.

No furniture. No Cal.

Even if Apatia was just another cage like Eos, and the bond of enslavement was just as unbreakable—Riki had his thoughts to himself.

And for Riki, that was enough.

Chapter 1

Tanagura. The digital megapolis.

The capital of the world of Amoy was enveloped in an all-consuming night. Unlike the carnal delights of Midas, the sublime pleasures of Tanagura were even more restricted to the ranks of the truly powerful. In the chancellery of Parthia, dignitaries and diplomats mingled together at an evening soiree.

That this soiree was held not in the convention center of Mistral Park—also known as Area 3—but in Parthia was a nod to the incredible power wielded by these participants from across the galaxy. Only the chosen few were permitted to walk in Tanagura at all; that all thirteen Blondies were present and hosting the soiree was a luxury nearly impossible to contemplate.

Across the vast expanse of the reception hall, servitor androids catered to all present with the finest delicacies and drink. Pets attended to guests; amongst their number was an exquisite male with heterochromia, plying a seductive smile and deadly charm.

Kirie.

No one present would ever have thought that he was once a slumdog from Ceres.

It would seem a little polish goes a long way, Iason thought to himself as he caught Kirie out of the corner of his eye.

As Iason moved away from his crowd of admirers, Raoul Am stepped towards him.

"Well, well—Raoul. I thought you were not attending tonight?"

It was well known that Raoul despised these soiree. As one of the preeminent scientific minds in the galaxy, the politicking that came with these events was nothing but a waste of time to Raoul.

"I was going to remain in the lab, but Aisha talked me into this,"

Raoul deadpanned.

The soiree for tonight was run by Aisha Rosen—who, even considering the ice-cold hauteur that came naturally to Blondies, stood apart in her complete lack of empathy. Unsmiling, she was locked in conversation with two elderly dignitaries whose words no doubt held absolutely no interest for her.

Raoul raised an eyebrow. "You mean to tell me it is the duty of those of us who rule Tanagura to attend these without fail?"

Iason glanced at Raoul. "Why don't you take after Gideon for once?"

Raoul snorted. "You mean like *that*?"

Surrounded by beauties in elaborate offworld attire, Gideon laughingly sailed through the crowd. Though Blondies retained none of their human origins save for a nano-enhanced brain, Gideon had a wealth of wit and expression that placed him squarely at the center of attraction.

"It's only two hours or so. All you have to do is bear it with a smile and you'll have pleased Aisha," Iason said in clipped tones.

"And how is Apatia?" Raoul suddenly asked.

Iason barely raised an eyebrow. "It lacks a measure of the comforts of Eos, but it serves well."

"There are those who say it is too much for the likes of a love nest," Raoul countered.

It was a secret known only to Blondies that the ranks of furniture were selected from those in the care of the Guardians—a secret discovered by Riki. The truth behind what appeared to be a move to a more secluded hideaway in Apatia was to keep this from being known throughout Eos—a matter which the Blondies regarded with great urgency.

"A small price to pay to keep the peace in Eos," Iason replied.

To Raoul, the far simpler option would have been to liquidate Riki

—an option that Iason flatly refused to even consider. This obsession with a pet was unheard of for a Blondy. When it came to Riki, Iason's actions went beyond reason or restraint. It frustrated Raoul no end—but so long as Jupiter condoned it, no one could act against it.

To the elite of Tanagura, Jupiter was the ultimate authority. So long as Jupiter said Iason's actions did not contravene its will, there was no choice but to let matters take their course.

"So, what will you do with him?" Raoul asked the question on the mind of every Blondy.

"Let him walk the underworld. Within set parameters, of course."

Raoul didn't even blink.

When the furniture who used to be Vince from Riki's Guardian days assaulted Riki with a lasknife, the incident rocked all of Eos. Raoul, Orphe and Aisha watched the interrogation of Riki unfold. To Raoul, Riki's recalcitrance and refusal to speak on the details had a simple solution: chemical interrogation, followed by mindwipe. Orphe and Aisha would have concurred. It was Iason who kept that from taking place.

On the face of it, Iason was correct, even if the psychological breakdown of the furniture and death of his higher order brain functions and the unexplained malfunction of security cameras at the scene left questions yet to be resolved. Were it not for Iason, Riki would not have spoken of his days under the Guardians and the twisted past between him and Vince.

There was no fabrication in human memory. Even after death, it could be retrieved and reconstructed from the brain effortlessly. But there were limits; the mind could delude itself. Kirie was an example of that. For Iason to make Riki disclose the truth without resorting to chemical interrogation was not only because Iason was a skilled interrogator—Raoul sensed the presence of a bond between Master and Pet far beyond the outward signs of such a relationship.

"If I said I loved Riki, would you find that amusing?"

There was no mirth in those words. For a Blondy to even consider them was unspeakable. Raoul stood speechless.

"How remarkable Aisha gave you permission to take the pet to Apatia," Raoul replied, though no doubt Iason would have found a way to pressure her into it even if she'd resisted.

"Because I have been right before on such matters," Iason said.

Raoul paused. "You mean Katze?"

Iason nodded in response.

By rights, Katze should have been liquidated for what he'd done, but Iason had set him free. It was undoubtedly not motivated by kindness or compassion, but it was a harbinger of Iason's deviance from the norms of Blondy conduct.

Katze's brilliant conduct in the field validated Iason's foresight, but the act of pardon remained scandalous all the same.

"Katze will be a hard act to follow," Raoul stated flatly, knowing full well that Katze now dominated the underworld as "Scarface."

"No concern of mine." Iason's response took Raoul by surprise.

"You mean to tell me you do not intend to put your pet to work as you did your furniture?"

"Riki is my pet, not my furniture," Iason answered in clipped tones. To Iason, each was distinct—even if they both came from the same place, under the Guardians.

"Even with a pet ring, granting him freedom is undue risk. Do you think there will be no repeat of what happened with Daryl?"

Iason answered Raoul, "There are visible chains—and invisible ones. He knows which ones are heavier."

There was significant difference between Katze and Daryl.

Daryl had grown up with Riki in their Guardian days—and so together in Iason's quarters in Eos, Daryl could not restrain his memories. And with Riki in denial of his incarceration as a pet, the ensuing emotional firestorm made Daryl forget everything about being furniture.

"This is all the doing of my ego, My Lord. I beg you to be merciful to Master Riki."

Katze was never so reckless.

As furniture, Katze was of limited utility, but as Scarface—a major figure in the underworld—Iason saw fit to entrust the watching over of Riki to Katze. No emotional ties bound them. Not like with Daryl.

It was insanity to even attempt to bring a slumdog from Ceres to heel as a pet in Eos; but Iason would never say as much. To Iason, nothing was insurmountable.

Raoul sighed.

"You are nothing but reckless, but obviously nothing any of us say will stop you from your scandalous behavior now."

Chapter 2

Midas Standard Time: 1350 hours. Area I, Lhasa.

The air was suffocating. The clouds alternated between soot and black, sealing down the horizon. The humidity clawed at the skin.

There was never any end to the noise coming out of Midas. The city never slept.

Everyone in Midas worked for the pleasure quarters, catering to the whims and vices of those coming in from offworld. No one thought of this as a colossal cage, or this life as servitude.

In the center of Midas were two circular ringed plazas from which six streets radiated out in a sunburst. Guy set foot on one of them known for its courtesans and prostitutes. The street was known—perhaps officially, maybe not—as "the Birdcage." High-class, low-class, male or female, it could be had here, catering to any imaginable sexual desire.

The Birdcage was government-run; disease was unknown. Sex was everywhere. There was no guilt or hesitation associated with purchasing it. As long as the rules of Midas were observed, no vice, no matter how decadent, ever saw the light of day. Money took care of everything.

Guy walked quickly onto a side street, past an intersection and into a maze of buildings so thickly clustered daylight never saw the ground. It was only because it was still daytime that these side streets were even passable; at night pitch black descended, and even Guy would not think of taking such a shortcut.

Guy saw a shadowy figure ahead and slowed do down.

"What's going on?"

Sid turned around tiredly and gestured to the building ahead with his chin. "It's been five days. I swear, it's probably bullshit."

"Maybe," Guy replied quietly, entirety at contrast to the emotions coursing through him.

Riki sighted in Area 1.

It would have been easy to dismiss this as a rumor.

But there was something about where the sighting was, in Apatia—that was too much to ignore. Whether it was some grand practical joke or just a rumor—that one bit caught in Guy's mind.

Through Lavi's information, Guy and the others knew that Riki was keeping secrets from them. Not everything was as it appeared.

Guy felt it keenly. The three years Riki was gone became an insurmountable wall.

Guy and Sid stood before Apatia, before its impossibly high buildings, on what could well be a fool's errand. Four of them had taken turns in round the clock surveillance, looking for any sign of Riki.

"Let's take three hour shifts and see what we can find."

No one objected to Guy's proposal. Not even Luke, who complained about everything.

From 1700 to 2000, it was Guy's turn on watch. "You're good now." Guy patted Sid on the shoulder.

"Yeah... well, I'll stick around for a while to chat."

"If you like."

Thirty minutes elapsed. Guy lit a cigarette.

Sid started to rise.

It was at that moment...

"Hey," Guy whispered. "That's Riki." Those words were loaded with meaning.

Riki emerged from a doorway, in his usual slumdog clothes so out of place in Apatia. Oblivious to the eyes watching him, he stepped out into the street.

"Let's roll."

Guy tossed his lit cigarette away and started walking.

The night is heavy in the slums.

Unlike Midas where the sea of holographic illumination is endless, darkness devours every corner of Ceres after sunset.

What was left of Bison packed Kelly's hangout this evening as every other for the last month, having ceased work at the tuning shop entirely to pore over images of Riki, mapping his every move on the holodisplay on the wall.

"He actually lives in Apatia?" Sid whistled.

Norris pondered, "I wonder who he's being kept by," earning him a sharp nudge in the ribs from Sid.

"I'd like to hear the story of how this came about," said Luke, without a thought for the expression on Guy's face. "The security must be top notch."

Guy's hard gaze burned into the holodisplay. "Biometric scanners?"

"If only it were that easy." Riki's fingerprints, palm prints and retinal patterns were already on file. Every present in the room was a seasoned hand at breaking through security measures, whether it was boosting aerobikes or getting into secure compounds.

"So now what?"

"He only goes out once a week. That leaves forced entry as the only option."

Having observed Riki continuously for a month straight, they knew

his schedule completely.

Riki left his residence on Wednesday afternoon for a busted up pharmacy a short distance away, only to return late in the evening. No one had an idea of what went on there, but Riki certainly didn't have a part-time job and no one from Apatia would have anything to do on the surface with such a run-down business.

The incongruity of it struck everyone present.

On a day Riki was certain not to visit, a brief reconnaissance of the store turned up only shelf after shelf of cheap supplements and one incredibly bored clerk. The pharmacy was certainly not taking in substantial revenue. So what was Riki doing there?

No one had an answer. The only thing that was certain was Riki spent an inordinate amount of time on the property every Wednesday without fail.

"The question is the first line of security at the entrance and exit."

All condominiums were the same: exit presented no challenge, but entry presented numerous difficulties. For a compound in Apatia, the security was doubtless, strengthened by several orders of magnitude.

"Then how about lifting the access code off a resident?"

"You mean a snatch?"

"Just the code itself."

The crowds in Midas provided cover. There was nothing to getting close to a target. Females in Midas presented the best opportunity; the ruthless efficiency of the Midas Security Forces in apprehending criminals lulled them into relative complacency on the streets.

"Then let's do it."

They were in deadly earnest. Breaking in only to get caught was not an option. To end up like Kirie—wherever he was—at the hands of the Midas Security Forces was to be avoided at all costs.

The objective was Riki. This was a thrill beyond racing aerobikes at maximum speed.

At the end of it, there are questions to be asked, no matter what.

With that thought, Guy cut the power to the holodisplay.

Chapter 3

The holographic billboards in Midas continued to swirl in an ocean of light.

At the edge of that light was Apatia. The only permissible private property in all of Midas was virtually an island unto itself.

Such was the importance placed on privacy that security was subtle rather than heavy-handed. There were any number of luxury hotels with ostentatious amenities by comparison; in Apatia, each residence was discrete, independent of the others completely.

Of course that was contingent on the law being faithfully observed, but none within the compound were actually foolish enough to create such a scandal as to lose the privilege of being sequestered from prying eyes.

It was not as luxurious as Eos, but the accommodations were the epitome of chic nonetheless. Riki's hands paused on the dataslate, after repeating a dozen mistakes.

"Five years and this is how my brain's gone stupid?"

Riki stopped to stretch. Pets in Eos were kept illiterate—and so everything in the environment depended on shapes and colors. For Riki to be granted access to a dataslate was an unheard-of luxury for a pet. On returning to Ceres after his escape for 18 months, the dataslate was his constant companion—but the lack of higher order learning modules appeared to have cost him.

To Riki it seemed that in moving from Eos to Apatia he'd exchanged one gilded cage for another. Not that he'd expected Iason to consent to this.

I can 't be dreaming this, right?

But Riki felt invisible chains binding him. Chains which dulled his senses over the last five years, senses he would need again to survive in the underworld. Chains which would snap tight on him if

Riki were ever to fail, and take him back into total enslavement.

Riki desired to avoid that at all costs.

He didn't understand what Iason had in mind granting this level of freedom, but he had no intention of being content with this state of affairs. Unless Riki could prove he could operate in the underworld—and to do so he had to prove himself to none other than Katze—he would return to being a pet in Eos, forever in sexual servitude.

This was his only chance. He was certain of it.

Riki cracked his knuckles and returned to the dataslate.

It was at that moment the door chimed.

Riki decided to ignore it.

The door chimed even more persistently.

"What the fuck?" Riki continued punching away at the dataslate.

The chiming refused to cease.

Fuck that, why don't you just open it yourself, Iason?

Even after moving to Apatia, Riki's blatant disregard for pet etiquette remained unchanged. He still refused to answer the door for Iason, Master or not.

And there was no furniture to answer the door.

In Eos, it was a matter of course for furniture to answer the door for the Master. But this was Apatia—and Iason quite possibly did not care for the difference. Here, it was normal to input the access code for entry into one's own domicile, whereas in Eos human servants were omnipresent.

But Iason would never keep on ringing the door chime like that, even though his visits had no set pattern and were always

unexpected. Iason knew it was pointless to expect Riki to ever embrace pet etiquette, and hated wasting time; Iason always entered on his own.

But for some reason, tonight was different.

The door chime continued to ring.

Dammit.

Riki rose to his feet and entered the living room. Placing his hands on the security control panel, he unlocked the door.

He approached the entrance not because of any desire to greet Iason formally, but to speak his mind on the annoying repetition of the door chime. Even if it was Iason.

The door slid open.

Riki stood transfixed.

There was no Iason there—but familiar faces from Bison. Faces that had no business in Apatia.

You have to be kidding me. Riki doubted his eyes.

"What's the matter, Riki?" Over Guy's shoulder, Luke called out wearing a cheeky grin.

Riki knew then that this was real. Very real. That this wasn't just coincidence or accident, but trouble—big, big trouble.

The thought patterns of Tanagura's Blondie elites were inscrutable at best, but there was absolutely no second guessing Iason. Riki knew this; the lesson was ground into the very fiber of his being through pain.

Riki expected no one but Iason to ever set foot these quarters in Apatia. An oversight on his part.

I should have checked the security cameras before I opened the door.

Without asking, the uninvited guests started moving forward as the door closed behind them.

Riki bit his tongue and braced his arms across at entrance.

"Go home."

He couldn't allow this to continue. Not now. Not for them.

Guy said, "We need to talk."

"Then I'll come see you tomorrow. Myself." Riki knew this was easier said than done, but anything was better than Guy and the other Bison members remaining here for a second longer.

Sid narrowed his eyes. "It's not like we came I shake you down, Riki. You don't have to kick us out like this."

"It's not like that. I have my own issues here."

Luke whistled. "So it's like that, huh? Can't have daddy see us here, right?"

Riki ignored the lash. "Tomorrow. 1300 hours. I'll be there at Kelly's. Go home."

Guy's voice was harsh. "We're here because we have to talk, Riki. I don't care if your patron is here or not."

"Yep yep, you're our buddy, we should thank him for taking care of you, right?" Norris said with a voice loaded with irony.

"So what, rock and a hard place, Riki?" said Luke.

Riki growled, "I told you, I'll be there tomorrow. Go the fuck home. Now."

Silence.

It was at that moment the door chimed once again, and the safety locks disengaged.

All eyes turned to the door as it slid open. At that moment, the shock that descended on the scene was total.

The figure in the doorway was impossibly tall.

Impossibly pure strands of silver hair flowed just over the shoulders. The eyes were hidden by wraparound datavisors. Soft light reflected from the cultured silk robes. To the gathered slumdogs from Ceres, it was clear all of it cost beyond imagining.

This is Riki's patron?

Time ceased in the room entirely.

It was true enough they didn't mind a chance encounter with whoever it was—but none of them had any idea they would encounter someone like *him*.

A patron rich and powerful enough to keep Riki in Apatia. They'd assumed it wasn't a woman. They'd thought Riki had a measure of control over the relationship. That whoever kept Riki was made soft by money and luxury—or so they'd thought. The aura of power emanating from the silver-haired divinity in the doorway was overwhelming.

Who is this guy?

They swallowed their fear.

"Well, what do we have here?" Asked Iason.

The intonation was calm but Riki heard the unmistakably ominous tone in Iason's voice clearly. Even in personal clothes and not the uniform of a Blondy, Iason's demeanor was unchanged.

Riki remembered distinctly Iason's instructions: *When you return, cut all ties with your counterparts in the slums*. He knew all too well that this was the price had to pay to ensure Guy and the other Bison members remained alive.

I've heard this voice before, Guy thought, but with the wraparound datavisors he couldn't even see the face.

The door shut behind Iason. Riki parted the members to each side and stepped forward, placing them behind him.

"I'll send them home. Right now."

Riki couldn't help but think Iason would call security down any second. If he hadn't already done so.

Behind Riki, the members of Bison, oblivious to the fact that they were in the presence of a Blondy, erupted in anger.

"Hey, you know Riki, maybe you need to teach him what we're about."

"What, is this all supposed to be *hush hush*?"

"There's no backing down now, Riki."



Iason ignored the voices. Turning to Guy, he spoke in clipped

measured tones. "The security here is supposed to be very good. How did you get the access code?"

Without breaking a sweat, Guy reached into his vest and pulled out fake IDs and the datalinks he'd used to crack the outer door. He knew there was no way to lie to Iason and get away with it.

"I must say that you slumdogs are always quite ingenious."

The words coming from Iason carried no hint of praise. Just the word *slumdog* spoke volumes. Iason knew who they were, where Riki came from. The others in the room were riveted in place, in shock.

Who the hell is this guy?

Guy and the others had thought whoever kept Riki was a corrupt lecherous pervert, soft and weak. Those preconceptions crumbled to dust before the presence of the Blondy before them.

They'd also thought the secret of Riki's origin as a gang leader in Ceres was information they could use to their advantage. That this would provide no leverage was unexpected and made Guy and the others think twice about where they stood.

Riki watched Guy take out the break-in tools and gritted his teeth. Carrying them was tantamount to admitting forcible entry. Riki now had no room to claim he dragged his old crew in of his own accord; any attempt to use such a cover story to protect them was futile now.

To Guy and the others, a Blondy was just a wealthy denizen of Tanagura, nothing more. Riki knew how very wrong and very lethal such an underestimation of the likes of Iason was for all concerned. The difference between the others oblivious to the threat presented by Iason's very presence, and Riki who felt the fear of it down to his soul was determinably vast.

Iason seemed to understand that Riki hadn't pulled his old crew into the quarters on his own accord, and slid out of his robe.

"Well, let us see what our uninvited guests have to say for

themselves."

Uninvited guests. Riki paled at the veiled threat behind those words.

Luke whistled low. "Then yeah, we'll do just that, thanks."

Now that they were out in the open, there was nothing else for the others to do but put their cards on the table. Luke, Norris, Sid... and then Guy walked into the palatial living room.

"Will you look at that."

"Whoa."

"Never thought I'd see something like this."

The difference between the cramped quarters they were accustomed to in the slums and these palatial surroundings in Apatia was night and day. One and all the hardened survivors of the Ceres streets glanced from right to left in awe, tinged with envy.

For Riki to disappear without warning to surface in such luxury only added to the questions. Until they set foot in this room the reality of it had a trace of the unbelievable to it.

How? Why? In a place like this?

It was as if Riki betrayed them for this.

Iason removed his datavisors quietly.

The slumdogs stood in disbelief at the perfect beauty of Iason's features.

Guy swallowed audibly. *I know that face.*

Deliberately, Iason blinked once.

As if on cue, his hair extended out to his waist and changed color to an immaculate blond.

For Riki this was a usual sight. For the others, it came as a complete surprise that Iason could change the color and length of his locks

literally with an eyeblink, that this came with such ease to a Blondy.

Riki remembered seeing Iason as a brunet once in the underworld—he was convinced then it was a wig, not the sort of nanomachine-driven change that was on display now.

The unnatural height and the cultured blond hair. Those were the status symbols of the ruling elite of Tanagura, the Blondies. Iason was likely the only one of them all who ever changed his hair in this manner.

Riki grabbed onto Guy's arm. "Guy, stop." *Don't do it.* Riki pleaded with his eyes for Guy to not challenge Iason to a fight. Blondies—augmented through biotech and nanotech—walked a different level of existence from any slumdog out of Ceres, in everything from physical dimensions to logic patterns. The outcome of any physical confrontation was never in doubt.

Guy struck Riki's hand away.

"I always wondered what those six months of imprisonment meant."

The room turned as one, not understanding those words.

They came for Riki. That much was certain. Everything changed once Iason stepped into the scene. *What's going on? What the hell?* The others turned to each other in silent doubt.

"You wanted me to become a pet. So much so it was worth 10K credits to Kirie to make it happen by setting me up. Am I wrong?"

What? Impossible. What?

The others stood in complete shock.

"And how is it possible Riki is here with you now?"

This was what Guy wanted to know—the true relationship between Iason and Riki.

These unbelievable words out of Guy struck with the impact of

explosives. What was even more unbelievable was the look on Riki's face, as if he knew.

It would be hard to sense what Iason was thinking. Iason was augmented to the point he was more inorganic than man.

The grace of his movements, the depth of his clarion voice, that piercing stare made possible by nanomachines, voice modulation and bionic optics. The finest technology in the known universe available only in the ruling elite of Tanagura. The only thing purely organic were the unaugmented parts of his original brain—but the aura of power and personality emanating from Iason muted any thought of this towering Blondy possessing anything other than dominant will.

Guy visibly seethed. The spectacle was too much. He glared at Iason. "This isn't fair at all."

Iason curled his lip in amusement.

Guy felt a rush of anger. Trapped in a room with Iason after being set up by Kirie, he remembered Iason doing the same—as if in mockery. "I think I have a right to know what a Blondy elite is doing keeping Riki in a place like this." Every word from Guy carried a trace of venom.

Iason spoke. "And you believe this wounds your pride?"

Guy clenched his fists in rage. *No, no, no.* Unable to deny the truth of those words.

The slumdogs were only too aware that not only Riki but Guy—had secrets unknown to them. *Seriously? How? Why?* All they could do was look on in silence and watch the scene unfold.

Riki stood between Iason and Guy, his heart being crushed in his chest.

Iason broke the silence. "You were essential. To bring Riki to me required the one he most cared about in his life. You served admirably as bait."

"Bait?"

"Yes. You were Riki's partner, after all."

Riki recoiled in pain. "Iason!"

It was only then that Guy knew the name of the Blondy who stood before him.

For the entire time he was kept in thrall, the Blondy never spoke his name. Even Kirie only called him "Blondy" by reference; probably because Kirie didn't even know. And because all Kirie cared about was the money. To Iason they were all slumdogs, not worthy of an introduction.

But not Riki.

Riki's eyes on Iason spoke of pain beyond imagining.

Iason continued on remorselessly, "When Riki found out Kirie had sold you to me for 10K credits, he came to me in anger, saying if anything happened to you that I would pay for it. Such reckless words coming from a slumdog to a Blondy, are they not?"

Guy spun around and stared at Riki. His wordless gaze cut deep.

Riki pleaded with his eyes. *Stop. Don't say any more, Guy.*

"I did not release you back to the slums on a whim. Riki came with me in exchange for your life."

Riki felt the stares lashing into him from all corners of the room. He knew this was momentary—that this plain signified only the beginning.

"To release you unharmed back into the slums, Riki agreed to two conditions. One, to become my personal property. Two, to cut all ties with the slums. Forever."

With those words, Iason turned to the others in the room.

"I have no interest in what you are here for. It is evident that this

was entirely unexpected to Riki. That you intruded here I will leave unpunished—this once. Leave before I change my mind." Iason's eyes spoke with more than a hint of threat.

The slumdogs felt their throats tighten. In the presence of a Blondy, defiance promised swift and deadly consequences.

"You have no right."

Iason's lips twisted cruelly.

"Riki is my pet. As his Master, I have every right."

To a Blondy, a pet was an impossibly expensive sexual slave.

To a slumdog, a pet was a companion to lavish attention on, baths and playtime.

Blondie pets were the product of extravagance, power and domination. Enslavement beyond the comprehension of a slumdog.

So even when Kirie talked about the pets of Eos—Guy and the other Bisons thought it was another fabrication. They could never imagine that Riki would become one himself.

Even with the reality of Riki being kept in Apatia staring them in the face, the scene in the minds of the slumdogs had been that of a wealthy patron keeping a lover. To see Iason in person was to know how that description did nothing to encompass the truth of it.

In Ceres, with the male to female ratio at 9:1, sex between men was the norm; there was no marriage, no strict adherence to monogamy. It wasn't that Riki was with someone other than Guy that was surreal—it was the sheer impossibility of him being kept by a Blondy.

Iason continued on relentlessly. "The word of a Master is absolute. On my command a pet will kiss my feet. If I order masturbation in my presence, the pet will spread his legs. *That* is a pet."

Guy exploded in anger. "Lies! Riki would never do that!"

The words ran through all the slumdogs.

Riki had changed in the last three years. But crushing the Zekes had proved he was the indisputable leader of the most feared gang in Ceres.

Riki would never change.

Riki was Riki.

Riki would never be a pet.

Even if it was the will of a Blondy.

As if reading the minds of those present, Iason's lip curled in mockery. "Then see for yourselves. Riki, come here."

Riki hesitated.

"It is futile to resist me."

The words cut deep into Riki. Because they were true. Because Riki had fallen. There was no pride left.

If Riki showed the others what he was now, everything would end for them.

Probably.

Maybe.

But Riki could not bear to take the steps. His heart crushed in his chest. Knowing that Iason would punish hesitation without a second thought, chills ran down to his fingernails.

"I told you never to make me repeat my commands." The harshness of Iason's words cut into Riki again. But the eyes of the others kept Riki from moving forward.

Without warning, Riki collapsed.

"Ah... Ahhh!"

Riki twisted in agony.

The slumdogs stood there in shock, in disbelief of what was happening.

"Riki! What's going on! Riki!" Guy rushed to Riki's side.

Riki struggled against Guy's embrace, features contorted in pain. "Stop... please... stop!" Hands over his crotch, in tears, writhing against the floor.

"Your foolish pride brought you this," Iason said without mercy. He tapped the control ring on his hand. The waves of pain washing over Riki ceased, leaving him breathless. "Come, Riki," Iason commanded again, voice cracking like a whip.

With ragged breaths, Riki rose and crawled to Iason's feet.

During the second Bacchanalia in Eos, Riki subjected to a demonstration of the pet ring and never-ending waves of pain. Sexually violated repeatedly by Iason, Riki barely recalled the event. The morning after, Riki was exhausted and bedridden for half the day—but nothing more came of it.

This was different.

Riki could sense Iason's genuine anger. Felt it cut into him.

The slumdogs stood there speechless as Riki crawled to Iason. Riki's crotch throbbed with the effects of the pet ring. His entire body shook against his will. Low cries of anguish came uncontrollably from his throat. Whether it was anguish from being seen like this by his crew... Riki had no idea.

Riki knew that Iason *owned* him. Body and soul. And he knew from how Iason had turned him into this, the sort of pain that Iason could inflict without a second thought.

To let Guy and the other Bisons walk away from this, Riki knew he had to debase himself completely in front of them.

Breathless, Riki collapsed at Iason's feet. Iason put forward a

perfectly shined boot into his face.

"Lick it."

Riki's shoulders shook. Saying *lick* instead of kiss was to demonstrate to the others the extent of Riki's debasement.

I can't resist now.

It was because Riki couldn't completely walk away from his past as leader of Bison that this state of affairs had come to pass. Iason was just reminding him of the fact. Not Guy, not the others. Only Riki.

Riki put his lips on the boot.

From top to bottom, side to side, his tongue rolled over the leather.

Without a care for the assembled stares of the others stabbing into him, Riki licked at the boot until it dripped with spittle.

"Stop." So commanded Iason. Riki could not feel his tongue, or even his jaw.

"Do you understand now?" Iason glanced at the slumdogs.

Silence.

"What did you do to Riki?" Guy asked in a pained voice, eyes flashing with hate.

"The word of a Master is absolute. Riki has been tamed to do my will. The Riki you knew as the leader of Bison is no more. *Riki is my pet.*"

Iason's words cut through each and every one present.

Sid spoke. "... Let's go."

He gestured to the door with his jaw. There were unanswered questions, but none of that meant anything after what they saw. Norris stepped out, shoulders slumped. Then Luke, gritting his teeth. Guy stood in place.

Sid called out. "Guy."

"I... want to talk to Riki."

Iason's voice was sharp. "No use will come of it."

Guy's eyes flashed back. "I just want to talk to Riki."

"I do not like to trouble myself when it is unnecessary. Do you not think it is best for you to step out while you still have the chance?"

Guy's face paled, features twisting.

"Iason."

Riki rose to his feet.

"Give me an hour... no, half an hour. I'll put an end to this."

Iason's eyes cut into Riki as if to ask, *Do you believe you can?*

"Please. Iason. Just leave us alone."

"Very well, Riki. You have thirty minutes. Put an end to it once and for all." The veiled threat behind Iason's words was clear. It was gazing into the edge of the abyss.

Riki nodded. "I understand."

Iason exited the room, all eyes on him. When the door closed behind him, Riki spoke. *Thirty minutes. What to say in thirty minutes.* "What was so important you couldn't wait until tomorrow to talk about it?" Riki sighed.

Guy lashed out in anger. "Fuck that. I want to know how the fuck you sold yourself on my behalf for a 10K credit debt!" It was Guy being trapped by Kirie, baited by the truth about where Riki had been for three years that led to Riki vanishing again. But Guy never felt so keenly responsible until today. Now.

The 10K credit debt didn't matter to Guy. His incarceration being just to bring Riki to Iason was what drove Guy to anger. Kirie, Guy,

everyone—dancing on the palm of Iason. Guy gritted his teeth in rage.

And this contract, this relationship between Riki and Iason being Guy's fault—that hurt most of all.

Guy didn't care about the money. It was all Guy could do to keep his anger from overwhelming him. But the heat of it lashed out at Riki. "Leaving me out of your life again? You want me to go home? What, after what I just saw you want me to just go home?! Don't you have any fucking pride?!"

Guy's words cut into Riki and himself at the same time.

Guy showing emotion to this extent—calm, collected Guy—this was the second time Riki had ever seen this. The first time had to do with Kirie, and now this involving Iason. But this was much more personal.

Riki had to clear things up. For himself. For Guy. "I didn't go with Iason to repay your debt."

"Same fucking thing, Riki. Or is there something you fucking can't tell me? Some secret that keeps you his fucking toy?"

"Three years, Guy."

"Three years what!"

"For the three years I was gone from Ceres, I was... his pet."

Guy stared at him in disbelief.

Riki continued. "I fucked up in Midas. I picked a fight with a Blondy and this is what I got." It was Riki being reckless; it was too late to regret now. "He didn't care, but I didn't want to owe anyone my life. So I tried to pay him back with the only thing I had—my body. I didn't know any better. I wasn't afraid of anything. I thought I could fucking get through it all somehow." It was one revelation after another, but the last words hit home. "When I saw Iason a year later in Mistral Park, I knew something was wrong."

Riki paused.

"A pet... being a pet isn't being human anymore."

Remembering the years of being tamed by Iason through sex and pain, Riki's expression clouded. "But if I opened my mouth, Guy, I was afraid you'd know, everyone else in Bison would know. I didn't want you to look down on me. I always said I'd rise out of the slums, make something of myself. All I became was a sex slave to a Blondy. I didn't want you to know. I thought I could get my old life back."

There was the cold, tainted truth. Riki thought this was the only way for everyone to know. "But that fucking idiot Kirie sold you for 10K credits." Riki gritted his teeth.

Guy lashed out. "So why the fuck did you do what you did?"

"It was the only way to set you free, Guy. You were bait."

Guy thundered, "What, because I was your partner?"

Riki nodded. "He told me to come back. He said he let me loose for a year in Ceres just to let me have a breather, that I was still registered as a pet in Eos. I wasn't having any of that. No way was I going back to being a pet. But then he took you hostage."

Guy said, "But our relationship ended four years ago, Riki. Why?" *It was my fault he fell for Kirie's bullshit and got snatched*, Guy thought. That Riki would throw himself back into Eos to free him drove Guy to the brink of insanity. This wasn't Riki. This couldn't be.

"Because you meant something to me, Guy."

Riki's words punched through Guy's heart.

"No matter how bad it gets in Ceres, anything is better than being a pet in Eos. I couldn't stand the thought of you ending up like that. If it took me being curled up quietly at Iason's feet, it wasn't too much of a price to pay."

Guy erupted in anger. "So you think that's okay? What we just

fucking saw is okay?!"

Riki knew it wasn't.

But he hadn't expected forgiveness from the start.

"Once I lost my pride... I found out what was most important to me, what I couldn't let go. It was you. Iason knew it and used it to get to me—used you. I'm the one who got you into all this. I wish things were different."

Guy seethed. "Since when the fuck did you become such a gutless coward, Riki? It's only been three fucking years."

Riki paused. "Three years? No, three months. That's all it took to cut me down and reduce me to nothing. Three months."

"How?"

Even if Guy needed to hear the truth... Riki was not going to go so far as to tell him what Daryl did with his mouth every night.

"Here." Riki grabbed his crotch. "There's a pet ring."

Guy and the other slumdogs stared in amazement.

"It's made for taming slumdogs. The pets coming from good breeding stock in Midas don't talk back to their Masters so they don't wear this. They specially manufactured this for me."

The slumdogs present could never have understood what a pet ring meant until they saw what Iason forced Riki to do.

"You saw what it does, right? Sometimes he'll tighten it on me when I have an erection, so I'm up all night." For Riki, there was no pleasure associated with it. Sex in Eos had nothing to do with pleasure for Riki at all.

Riki looked each Bison in the eye. "As long as this pet ring is digging into my crotch, I'm his pet. There's no getting around it. Just go home. Don't end up like Kirie. Just go home." His voice gained an edge. "The Blondies of Tanagura are far worse than

anything the Midas Security Forces could do. Remember that. Don't forget, there won't be a next time."

Remembering what happened to Kirie, the slumdogs were quiet.

Silence.

Guy turned to leave. "I'll go—for now. But I'm not done. You tell him that."

Riki responded angrily. "I told you there won't be a second time. Are you fucking crazy?"

Guy strode out.

"Guy!"

Riki took Luke by the arm. Luke's eyes widened in surprise. "Luke, please. Make sure he doesn't come back here ever again."

Luke opened his mouth to speak. Then wordlessly, he walked away.

The shadows swirled at their feet, the illumination shove them devoured the night sky.

What was left of Bison walked through the streets of Midas, amid the oblivious crowds of tourists, eyes straight to the front in silence.

Four figures walked into the ocean of light.

Chapter 4

Area 2, Flare. Sunset.

In the basement of the rundown pharmacy that served as the front for Katze's workspace, Riki labored away at the tasks given to him. "Dammit."

"Give it a rest. You're only wasting time now," Katze cautioned.

"I know that." Frustrated, Riki cut the datalink to the neural network.

"What's the reason for your lack of concentration?" Katze asked nonchalantly.

Riki slumped into a chair. "Guy and my old crew traced me down."

Why am I telling this to Katze?

Not that it mattered since Katze probably knew everything already by now. Riki knew anything he said would be more venting than confessional. He reclined back, brow furrowed in thought, and Katze glanced at him. It was clear that Riki wasn't the one who'd initiated contact.

If so, then how was he traced? The only exposure outside Riki had was once a week, from Apatia to here in Flare, on a fixed schedule.

Katze turned to Riki, the unquestionable forming in his mind. "They came knocking on the door?" He said it lightly. He didn't know the truth of the matter one way or another.

"They did." Riki answered matter-of-factly.

Katze blinked in surprise. "Well. It seems Bison is quite... resourceful."

He meant every word.

Other than the occasional trouble involving tourists, law

enforcement in Midas was ironclad. But Midas Security Forces did not oversee security in Apatia. And that is likely where Bison saw the advantage.

In getting to the truth of the relationship between the underworld and the Guardians through the databroker Zico of Nier Darts, Bison had already amply demonstrated they were no ordinary slumdogs.

It seemed Riki was not one of a kind.

Not that it mattered. A slumdog was a slumdog.

It was precisely that which gave Riki his value. Riki—with his street smarts, ambition, and determination—was well suited for the sort of work required by Iason in the underworld.

It served Katze all the same. Katze had had no intention of recruiting a slumdog from Ceres into his operations; Riki's entry into the equation solved a number of problems.

Even though they both began life under the Guardians, Katze had served as Iason's furniture without being marked by life in Ceres. Katze had no sense of identity or kinship with anything to do with Ceres; he would not have given even a thought to the slums had he not been assigned to this work.



While Katze might be feared on the streets of Ceres as "Scarface,"

the depth of loathing he felt for anything and everything to do with the slums exceeded that fear by several orders of magnitude. This loathing was never directed at Riki—which surprised even Katze.

"Are you being sarcastic?" Riki shot back.

Katze let that slide. "So you ended up face to face?"

Riki bit his tongue.

"I would wager in the presence of a Blondy, they would run away in terror."

"I wouldn't be like this if that's what happened."

Katze arched an eyebrow.

"I gave it some thought. I mean, they ran into Iason. It was unbelievable. I figured the only way to make things right and give them a chance of walking out alive was to come clean."

Katze paused. "You told them everything?"

Riki's face clouded.

So that's how bad it was, Katze pondered. It's a miracle Iason let them live.

It was unlike the Iason of old. There were things about what Iason had become that bothered Katze and made his stomach wrench.

Katze knew nothing about Guy and what was left of Bison other than what was in the datafiles. Guy was the Number 2 man in that gang—known for being calm under pressure and quick on his feet, a leader in his own right.

Riki continued, "I told them everything. That I was Iason's pet. That nothing was ever going to be the same again, that they were all better off forgetting me and letting it go. But Guy... Guy..."

Across the room Katze could almost hear Riki grind his teeth.

Katze had an idea of what was going through Riki's mind. It was hard enough to ensure that the slumdogs who set foot in Apatia left alive; that they did so at all was Iason's whim. But for Guy and those with him, the conclusion they would draw from the encounter would be vastly different. They lived without understanding the full extent of the power of life and death Blondies held over those made only of flesh and blood.

No doubt Riki was in agony thinking about it. There would be no second time. It would be nothing for Iason to crush Bison without a thought.

"Are you so concerned for Guy?" Katze asked.

Riki shot him a dark look. "Of course I am."

Katze paused, then said: "With Kirie you couldn't care less. But with Guy, you lose all composure. Is that what relationships are like in Ceres?"

Riki answered, "I don't know about anyone else, but there isn't any need for a relationship to just fuck. But people need something in each other... something meaningful. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

Katze fell silent.

Born in Ceres, raised under the Guardians. That was where the similarity ended between Riki and Katze, and Riki knew why.

Katze was a breed apart. After being sterilized to become furniture something broke in Katze forever, never to come back. Once rendered sterile, purged of sex drive, Katze thought it was perfectly natural as furniture to not feel emotion or desire. To live in close proximity to the sort of blatant carnality that an Eos pet flaunted constantly and to not feel anything at all—that was furniture.

But Katze learned that Iason never put Riki out at a Bacchanalia—and engaged purely in monogamous sex. And the first glimmers of doubt emerged in Katze.

That a Blondy—for all intents and purposes—immortal, a machine

god—would feel lust for a flesh and blood human being, a *slumdog* no less—this was unthinkable to Katze.

There were sexaroids available—warm, breathless imitations of humanity programmed solely for pleasure, entirely without life. Which was why in Midas none existed. From the most expensive tastes to the most depraved, all sexual desires in Midas were served by humans. Even in the depths of the rooms of Lanaya Ugo, the secret house of pleasure provided only the most beautiful—and mutilated—courtesans.

That Blondies were equipped to be the most ruthless example of sexaroids was unknown save to a very few. Only one Blondy ever dared to explore this side of the inorganic made desire: Iason.

And Iason's tastes ran to slumdogs, which was why he was called a deviant.

Katze did not have the means to feel pleasure in a physical sense; nanosurgery saw to it the organs required were removed down to the last nerve clusters, the last pleasure receptors. As such, Katze was incapable of feeling even warmth, let alone love. Not that either was required to live and be effective—or so Katze thought.

But to think that Iason lusted after Riki...

Iason did not have the ability to reproduce. Every part of Iason's sexual anatomy was inorganic. Was the very presence of it—inorganic or not—responsible for Iason's lust? Katze mused.

He knew that was not the case. It was the one thing left to Iason that was organic.

Iason's nano-enhanced brain.

All of Iason's senses were fed through constructed organs—but the brain remained capable of raw emotion. This was something beyond the reach of an AI.

And Katze was certain then that the presence of human emotion depended on being anchored in the physical—to lose the physical was to lose the emotion; to reach through the physical required

human contact.

If Iason never met Riki, none of this would have happened.

For a Blondy and a slumdog from Ceres to meet was impossible from the start. But it happened.

Riki broke the silence. "It's not like I was attached to the notion of monogamy. But after what I went through with Iason, it hit home. Iason and everything I went through under him was what made me think about relationships."

Katze listened to the words and felt there was some intangible fate connecting them all. "Even after the relationship was over for years, Riki?"

"I owe him. I dragged him into a lot of bullshit over the years." Riki let out a sigh.

Katze said quietly, "Then you need to get over it. Iason won't tolerate this again."

"I know that."

No you don't, thought Katze. "Riki, you don't understand. The Blondies aren't androids. Their bodies may be machine, but their brains—their minds—are entirely human. Don't ever forget that."

Riki stared at Katze in disbelief.

"I'm not saying grovel—but don't push his buttons."

"What do you mean push his buttons? I don't know what you're talking about." Riki threw his head back.

It's because you're this ignorant, Katze thought, "I'm telling you to understand what this is about."

"Understand? Sure I do, I'm his fucking pet."

"No, I'm saying that you've taken the most arrogant, most powerful Blondy on this entire planet and turned him into a jealous angry

sexaroid."

As if Katze had slapped him across the face, Riki recoiled.

"For Iason to bed you is exactly that. One of the thirteen chosen Blondies of Tanagura lusting after you, a slumdog. Do you even know what that means, Riki?"

At that moment, it was as if something stabbed Riki between the eyes.

Iason... lusting after... me?

Riki had never thought about it.

Because for Riki, sex with Iason was never a matter of choice. It always came with pain—overwhelming pain. Iason was the Master, Riki the pet. That was the extent to which Riki could form it in so many words.

"For a Blondy, this is the ultimate disgrace," Katze spat. "But Iason knows this and *chooses* to keep you. And not only that, but grants you this unprecedented level of freedom in Apatia that would be impossible for any other Eos pet. Understand this: Iason is assuming an unimaginable level of risk just keeping you alive."

With those words, Katze turned back to his dataslates.

Iason? Risk? Over me?

It felt to Riki like someone had smacked him and then slammed him across the back of the head.

To Riki, up till now it was Iason who had taken his life and twisted it, Iason who had all the power. A small part of this was Riki's fault for being stupid enough to think anyone could cut a deal with a Blondy and come out of it whole, but Riki had never volunteered to become a pet.

So when Katze said Riki was responsible for Iason becoming... a sexaroid, it gave him pause.

Iason feeling lust?

Iason risking everything... for lust?

The words echoed quietly in Riki's mind.

Chapter 5

The bar was crowded to the point of annoyance.

A place for chance encounters, it was standing room only that night at the counter and the few tables. There was no binging, no drinking to excess, because the point was not to drink.

There were regulars and newcomers alike.

There were those who were quick to proposition and those who took their time.

There were unspoken rules here.

Those who couldn't take a hint got the cold shoulder. Egotistical narcissists were ignored. Guys who confused being brutes with being wild and attractive were gone.

In a place like this, once you were marked, you were out.

By day, the bar was divided by age groups. By night, there was no generation gap or need to explain yourself. Either you found who you liked or you didn't. Either you got lucky or slept alone for the night. Desire was very simple.

Guy disappeared with a youth with square-rimmed glasses and dark hair to a private room on the second floor. No one even gave them a second glance.

But Guy wasn't here for a one-night stand. The dark-haired youth knew that as well. On entering the room, he walked right past the double bed and sat down at the sorry excuse for a table near the wall.

"And what is it you need?"

From his saddlebag he pulled out a datalink. Hal worked fast as a databroker.

In Ceres, nine-tenths of the residents were men; and as such the strong preyed on the weak. Hal looked like he was soft—but there was no end to the stories of him taking down drunks with one arm, or rapists with one kick.

Size difference didn't matter. Self-defense was a matter of fact in the slums. Rape happened because you let it happen—that's what everyone knew. Self-defense to the point of murder was par for the course. That's why weapons were everywhere.

"The layout for Dana-Burn."

"Dana-Burn?" Hal narrowed his eyes.

"A recent one."

"Why?"

"Aren't you supposed to not ask?"

People might lie. Money doesn't. That's what Lavi said. "I sell the information you pay for. I don't ask why." If Lavi held to a policy like that, no doubt Hal did as well.

"Well, yeah."

"And what?"

Hal drew a cigarette out and lit it. "Just curious is all, on what the second-in-command of the ol' Bison could be interested in."

Guy stared at him. "Are you going to take the job or not?"

Hal took a drag on his cigarette. "I'm telling you there's not much going for looking up information on a relic."

Guy gritted his teeth. *Did I choose the wrong guy to ask?*

Lavi was by far the greatest databroker in the slums, but when it came to Riki he had an unnatural degree of interest. Asking Lavi for this job was to risk getting found out completely. Guy wanted to avoid that at all costs.

So he chose someone different. As it turned out, a mistake. Guy wore his disappointment plainly. Hal smirked. "Sorry I can't be of much help."

That friendliness was the complete opposite of Lavi, nicknamed the *Grim Reaper*.

I may as well try someone else. Guy rose to his feet. "Thanks."

Hal replied, "But I know someone who would be."

Guy paused, and Hal continued, "If that's alright, I can make an introduction."

A bait and switch if there ever was one. Maybe it was a technique. Maybe Hal was more than he seemed.

Guy said, "Yeah, do that."

Rain like mist.

Drops never hitting the earth. It was a morning of ennui.

By the windowsill, Buczka stared at the ash-grey sky. Sighing, drawing back the blinds.

On days like this, the pain was gnawing. Dragging his injured leg behind, feeling aged in the rocking chair.

If eyes and ears were good, there was confidence that the mind was still sharp. Memory was better than the booze and drug-addled minds of youngsters.

That made being disabled all the more painful. The gap between the ever-sharp mind and the deteriorating body was unbearable.

"It's bad to get old."

Rubbing at his right leg, Buczka sighed.

There was no one there to comfort him. All of a sudden he was old.

It wasn't as if anyone was inconvenienced by it.

The doorbell chimed.

Buczka tapped the speaker module on his rocking chair arm. "Who is it!" he yelled, vexed.

Getting to the security panel was such a hassle that he'd put this speaker module on the rocking chair. There were no visuals enabled, but there was voice communication.

When you're old, the simple things are the best.

"I'm looking for Juma Buczka."

Buczka's jaw dropped, *Juma* being a term of respect for an elder. Most of the time it was "old man" or something worse. No one bothered to call him by name. Now, hearing it again with an honorific, Buczka was stunned.

"What do you want?" Buczka said in a much calmer tone. He coughed lightly.

"I'm sorry it's so early in the morning. I have a request."

The visitor was unfailingly polite.

Buczka pursed his lips. Crimes targeting old males living alone weren't uncommon. Those just out of the Guardians and those like Buczka were targeted. The former for rape, the latter for robbery. Life in the slums was all about survival.

Even if it was a familiar face, you couldn't open the door without caution. There was no telling when a familiar face would become that of a robber. For the unfamiliar, all the more reason for caution.

But for today, curiosity got the better of Buczka, to see who called him Juma.

"Come on in." Buczka sent a remote command to unlatch the door.

The man who entered walked in calmly. Facing the elderly invalid

in the rocking chair, he bowed. "Good morning."

Not bad. A man who knew his manners.

The dark, long-haired man was younger than Buczka expected. As if he had just turned 20.

"What are you here for?" Buczka asked.

"Forgive me for this sudden request; could you show me the architectural blueprints for Dana-Burn?"

Buczka pondered at the name of a long-forgotten building.

"The most accurate one possible. I heard you were the one to come to. The *Alda Garé*—Living Compendium—of Ceres."

Buczka whistled. "I haven't heard that name in a long time."

Even if it was blatant flattery, calling Buczka by that name... no one did anymore. Those words were extinct to Ceres.

So his interest in this mysterious stranger who brought those words to him did not abate.

"You want to go out there for thrills?" Buczka asked. For Ceres youth to do crazy things in pursuit of thrills was engraved into their DNA. Even Buczka did when he was young.

In youth, there are rituals of passage. In the slums where there is nothing to do and no future, where men outnumbered women vastly, the recklessness was endless.

The stranger smiled. "Something like that."

Buczka paused. "A bit too early to do something stupid."

He knew that Dana-Burn was where the Ceres Independence Movement had taken place. Whatever the truth of the matter behind it—stories that could condemn a man forever.

It wasn't so much a building as a monument to the defeated. It was

banished from sight and memory, a ruin without value.

But there was no end to the rumors about it. Buczka opened his mouth to mention that.

"I have my reasons," the stranger replied. "Please. Help." There was deep passion behind the words.

"Very well." This level of politeness, Buczka was unused to. In the slums, everything was about your own responsibility and how you dealt with it. He beckoned the stranger over to an ancient datalink.

"A real antique you've got there." Buczka knew that was what the lad was going to say, but he was still surprised. He uploaded the schematics for Dana-Burn into the terminal and entered a password. The stranger glared hungrily at the holodisplay. "Is it alright if I take a copy?" he asked tentatively.

"Do what you want. But it's from one generation ago: it's the newest one I have. I can't guarantee what it looks like now."

"I understand." Better than nothing. The stranger inserted a memstick into the terminal with practiced hands and downloaded the data.

When it was complete, the stranger bowed low. "Thank you very much."

Buczka just nodded in reply.

As he stepped outside into the waiting rain, the stranger dashed to his waiting aerobike. Buczka watched his retreat from the windowsill, pouring a glass from the bottle of liquor the stranger left by way of gratitude. As he put the glass to his lips, he paused.

"I never asked him his name."

Not that it mattered to Buczka at all.

Chapter 6

Midas. Area, Sasan.

That day, the control room for the container terminal leading to the underworld was abuzz with excitement.

Because of the magnetic storms in the western quadrant of the Galan system, most spaceliner travel on and offworld was delayed in some measure. This included vessels with cargo for the underworld.

Katze could not hide his irritation.

Ordinarily Katze would never Show even a ripple of emotion, but his annoyance radiated out and filled the air with tension.

Riki, as if he hadn't a care in the world, stared at the outside world from one of the windows. Midas was wreathed in illumination, but above Amoy the magnetic storms enveloped the skies in auroras.

"I'll do something, right." Annoyed, Katze cut his link to the neural network.

"Does this mean we don't have anything going on tonight?" Riki said, turning around.

"Everything is delayed because of the magnetic storm. Three days lost."

"Everything looks pretty from here."

Riki gazed at the auroras. Artificial illumination had a calculated, deliberate allure to the senses, but unpredictable natural light was alive, and changed its appearance as such. There was no getting bored with that.

Even the tourists to Midas must've thought this was a surprise. Of course, that included those whose visas would expire as a result of the delay and would face uncomfortable questions.

"As long as this storm continues, everything gets pushed to the right." Katze glared at the aurora.

"You can't fight nature, Katze," Riki said with sarcasm.

"We'll do what we can. I need to send this shipment out to Largo station for staging."

Riki walked to Katze's desk, bored to death. "I'll go, Largo's only half a day by aeroshuttle."

"Not you." Katze cut him off right away. Riki twisted his lips. "You won't let the chain on the leash stretch that far?"

Katze glared for an answer.

The truth of it was that the leash extended from Katze and however far he wanted it to. No matter how much he asked, Riki didn't have the freedom to go anywhere, do anything.

"You do the work you're assigned." Katze drew a digital page and a datalink from a drawer.

"Got it, boss." Riki snatched them off the desk.

Katze didn't even blink.

Nor funny, thought Riki. While he wanted to jerk Katze around, he wasn't having any of it.

Riki walked out.

Underground level. Container holding zone.

Containers stacked without a millimeter to spare, wllled as far as the eye could see.

The only way to cross this space was through the aerocrane rapidly shuttling across the area.

Having passed the ID checks, Riki traversed the area on a cart.

Without an automated navigation system built into the control panel, it would be nothing to get lost.

Checking the digital page for contents, Riki tracked down the containers on the list.

Same as five years ago. Being put to the test. Again. Riki scowled.

Back then it was more along the lines of "sink or swim" and being thrown into a gladiator pit of overaggressive men, constantly being heckled, day in, day out.

Not only that, but depending on the time of day they'd actually get physical. But it was Riki's policy to return what he got over and over again. They got the hint.

Not this.

Back then Iason wasn't the problem. These chains on him now were.

Maybe Katze felt it more keenly than Riki. It wasn't clear what kind of instructions Iason had left him, but it was evident that Katze went out of his way to keep Riki out of trouble with others during his menial tasks. *What am I, under quarantine?*

Even if it was true, there was no need to get upset. Because even if Riki didn't look for trouble, it came looking for him. Taking that into account, it was natural for Katze to take extra precautions.

As that crossed his mind, Riki's cart went by a brand new container. The container was marked blue for *Lukia*. Namely, it was a cryo-refrigeration unit. Riki remembered all the color codes and terminology by heart when he was running the delivery side; he was certain.

"Again? Some fucking asshole probably ordered another sex doll."

Riki twisted his mouth. He had once delivered to Laocon a package for Lanaya Ugo. In the slums, sexual freedom was the norm, and there was nothing to say anything was sinful or immoral. But Riki absolutely hated those with a fetish for children. And those who purposefully mutilated children for pleasure got on his case, badly.

"Business is all about supply and demand. The color of money is all the same," Katze had said succinctly. Riki couldn't argue with that.

Just thinking about it pissed him off.

Riki stopped the cart, and punched the container number into the digital sheet. Not that mattered, but there didn't need to be a purpose for it. The destinations of the cargo came up.

"A laboratory in Keeler... it's going to Raoul?"

Riki furrowed his brow at the unexpected discovery. What could Raoul want for his lab that required an entire container refrigeration unit? It was more suspicion than curiosity. Riki checked the contents list.

He stopped in his tracks.

Scrolling on the digital page were the names of pets slotted for disposal.

Is this for real?

Riki saw a familiar name and swallowed. "Sohya? Are you kidding me? He's an Academy Stock purebred..."

Sohya was a Blondy pet from after Riki's return to Eos. He belonged to... Gilbert. He was always ranked high in the Bacchanalia. Whether that was true or not Riki had no way of knowing, but that's what Sohya always said, calling Riki out.

"Well well, a slumdog. Definitely not good enough for a Bacchanalia."

That was Sohya all right. Fifteen. It didn't matter what the kid said. His blond hair and pale green eyes reminded him of Steen; that's all that made him stand out on the edge of his line of sight.

Even in Midas Pet Breeding Centers, Academy Stock purebreds were the highest class. Just having an Academy purebred at an auction raised stakes across the board. They were known to be bred for Blondies.

Lower class pets being liquidated might happen more often than not, but it was unheard of for a rare Academy purebred to meet the same fate. Just belonging to a Blondy ensured better treatment. Not here.

Sohya would, like all other pets, be moved into a pleasure house in Midas. The rarity of an Academy purebred available for pleasure for the public would draw in the crowds and the money. For a female pet, the possibility of bearing a child was added value.

It was because they were so valuable that they were offered as gifts to dignitaries and royalty from across the known galaxy. They were worth more that way than being bought outright at a pet auction. It was hard to understand what these moneyed types were thinking.

Riki had heard a lot of pet-related information since he moved to Apatia—or more correctly, since he started working under Katze again.

Of course with Riki's ID there were limits to what he could access, but considering all he had in Eos was a dataslate with no neural network access, the level of information he could draw on now was incomparable.

Riki and Katze. Pet and ex-furniture.

Two who could talk about Eos as it really was.

Both of them survivors of the slums of Ceres.

The parts about Eos that were beyond Riki, Katze knew in detail. Not that he would say.

The pets of Eos. An existence lit by shadow, blinded by light.

Pets bred in Midas were inscribed with a serial number on the soles of their feet. That they were illiterate was something Riki found out only on being taken to Eos by force.

Everything in an Eos pet's life was governed by colors and geometric shapes, and it was unbelievably hard for Riki to adjust. It wasn't easy for him to beg Iason for anything, but when he at last

received a barely functional dataslate, he'd breathed a sigh of relief.

It occurred to Riki that this enforced illiteracy was to prevent the pets from talking once they were downgraded to sexual servitude in a pleasure house in Midas, or sent offworld, from revealing what went on in Eos. Riki mentioned this once to Katze.

Katze laughed. "They're imprinted to not care about anything other than sex. They don't think about anything else. That's what a pet is."

A pet was a sex toy bought and sold. A Certificate of Breeding required, without human rights, because they were merchandise and nothing more.

And that's why they didn't need to know anything.

The slumdogs of Ceres had no human rights to speak of from the start. What little knowledge they needed to survive within the confines of Ceres itself, they learned from the Guardians or quickly picked up from the streets. For Riki to prefer the life of a slumdog to that of a pet, was because even in the gutter he had a choice to live in the gutter.

But the slums were slums.

No matter how downtrodden someone is, there is a sense of smugness from knowing there's worse out there. Even if that smugness is built on fabrication and groundless fact.

For Midas residents, the slum was a necessary evil. And for every lower caste resident across every star system, the same held true. Across the known worlds, they talked about Ceres as the hotbed of unrest.

A mechanized city ruled by an immortal AI. Even not knowing where Midas was, they knew across the stars that there was a place where men were forced into close quarters without women, without ID. Ceres.

Tanagura wouldn't even recognize the existence of Ceres, but for the offworld tourists coming to Ceres, all the advertising mentioned Ceres plainly.

The one blight on paradise. The fate of all those who rebelled against the natural order and lost. A place no one stepped in.

When working on a cargoliner with Alec, Riki then saw firsthand how other worlds looked on Ceres, how it was damned.

For Riki to take life as a slumdog in Ceres over a pet in Eos was because even the freedom to just be damned was preferable to nothing, never thinking it was for the best.

For the pets of Eos to call out Riki repeatedly as a slumdog and for Riki to be able to dismiss them out of hand took a careful appraisal of the situation. Of course, it was open knowledge anyone who laid a hand on Riki would pay in blood.

Riki couldn't believe that an Academy purebred would end up in disposal. Not only that, but to be sent to Raoul's lab.

Iason had asked him once: *Would you have preferred to be a test subject in Raoul's lab?* This after Riki had escaped from Eos and been recaptured, and then expected liquidation; but the aerocar had taken Riki to Genova in Mistral Park. Riki thought he was going to be tortured.

There was what happened with Mimea, and the fact that Raoul despised him. It had been sarcasm on Iason's part.

Or maybe not? Riki paused.

Riki, have you ever thought about how fortunate you are compared to the other pets? Katze's words haunted him.

Fortunate? To be here? Now?

Best not to think about what you didn't need to know. If that was the way to survive as a pet, then Riki was a failure. No, just being outside of Eos was reason enough to mark Riki as a complete exception to the rule.

Then, was Katze more fortunate than the other furniture for being assigned to work in the underworld on behalf of Iason?

Riki wanted to know. But he would never ask, since asking Katze why Riki had been moved to Apatia was bound to be ignored.

Truth is a matter of perspective. You say that, Katze, but I don't know what perspective is anymore.

With a sigh, Riki dimmed the window to the container.

Chapter 7

Ceres.

What remained of Bison left Maxie's tuning shop for Kelly's hangout. Custom components for racing aerobikes were unloaded into Kelly's garage.

"Dammit, Maxie charged an arm and a leg for this."

"Yeah."

"Hey Norris, you can't get a discount off your boyfriend there?"

"Not a chance."

"Seriously?"

The conversation was flat. Ever since they'd returned from Apatia, none of them had any heart. Not after seeing... that. But since there was no use in going over it again and again in their minds, they kept their hands busy.

Then Guy received a call on his wristphone.

Everyone locked eyes on him.

Guy read the contents, fired back a short message, and cut the datalink.

"Who is it?"

"Some guy I met the other night asking me out."

The obvious lie was met with disbelieving silence.

Ever since Apatia, it was obvious that something inside Guy had changed. As if all mention of Riki was completely off limits. But the look in Guy's eye worried everyone.

"Come on, Guy," Norris said.

"What are you doing off on your own?" Sid's brow furrowed.

"Fucking."

Luke yelled in anger. "Guy!"

Guy's face remained expressionless. "You remember how Kirie brought the entire Midas Security Forces down on Ceres?" The sudden change in subject took everyone aback. "I can't tell you what I don't know. If I did and I tried to lie about it you'd find me out in an instant, but I really can't tell you what I don't know."

The memory of being targeted for beatings and by the Midas Security Forces was still raw. The words hit home.

Luke spoke up. "What do you plan to do?"

The tension rose in the air.

Guy said in a nonchalant tone, "Bring Riki back. What else?"

The words cut through the air like a razor. A chill ran up everyone present.

"Are you fucking out of your mind?" Sid screamed.

"You're going up against a fucking Blondy from Tanagura!" Norris bellowed.

"And?" Guy's voice was flat.

"Wow, losing Riki drove Guy over the edge," Luke deadpanned.

Guy spat. "You think I'm going to back down after what happened?" His eyes were cold, furious.

Don't fucking do it. Everyone's mind was on those words, but no one said a word.

Guy continued, "So don't ask where I'm going or what I'm doing. You don't know a thing. Leave it at that."

This isn't going to make Riki happy. No one said the obvious.

Everyone wanted to do something about it. Everyone wanted to get a shot in. But this was a losing fight.

Iason.

A Blondy from Tanagura.

Far too powerful.

Impossible.

Zero percent chance of success.

You won't get a second chance. Riki's words weighed heavy.

If it had been clear there was a Blondy there, no one would have ever set foot in Apatia from the start. Nothing that reckless would have happened. But it was done because of ignorance, and to even come back alive was a miracle. The craziness of it.

But the price was far too high. Everyone felt it.

"I'm going now."

Guy broke the silence and walked out. The others could only watch quietly.

The night sky was filled with stars. Not that anyone in Ceres would have cared to look up at them.

Guy walked alone down the neon lit streets. He arrived at an alleyway and stopped his feet.

"Berne?" Guy called out. The figure in the shadows stubbed out a cigarette on the wall.

"You have my payment?"

Guy wordlessly drew out a memstick.

Berne slotted it into a datalink and confirmed the funds. Without

another word he took the bag at his feet and handed it to Guy. The weight of it sat heavy in his hands.

Guy turned around without another word and walked away.

In Lupa Yapp on the east side of Ceres, the sun set as always.

Norris sat down on the floor of his quarters and slowly pulled out a cigarette. A night without the others was long.

But he didn't feel like rolling into Maxie's bed. For whatever reason, he just wanted to be alone.

What did his eyes see, who was he thinking of, where was his gaze going to fall?

Between his fingers, the ash of the cigarette broke into the ashtray. Only at that moment did time move again.

In the darkness, Luke stumbled.

Drunk, or maybe high, he was whistling along the road. No one looked at him. Because there was nothing unusual about the sight. Not in Ceres.

Luke tripped, then fell with a loud thud.

No passerby even turned to look. He was buried face deep in trash. And then he started laughing. "Scares the fuck out of me... can't keep up with this shit. Riki... we can't."

His words melted away into the darkness.

The counter of a bar, wreathed in purple smoke.

"Your date didn't show?" the man said conciliatorily, and pulled his stool up.

Thin clipped brows, glitter in the eye shadow. Pressing his body forward, he parted his orange hair lazily.

Sid looked at him sideways.

"Won't you buy me a drink?" the orange-haired stranger said.

Sid spat. "Get the fuck lost."

"You're just impotent is all." The stranger snorted.

And then a kick sent him and his stool flying.

Sid left his drink on the counter and raised himself up.

He wasn't angry at the stranger. All he wanted was an excuse. An excuse to get this frustration off his chest. It was the stranger's bad luck.

"Say it again, fucker." Sid started cracking his knuckles. The bar went quiet.

Swallowing loudly, the stranger ran.

Chapter 8

Afternoon. Overcast skies.

Between Ceres and Mistral Park, Geneva was quiet.

Guy stopped his aerobike and pulled his ID tag out of the controls. He threw a lock around a piece of rebar sticking out of the concrete.

Even with such precautions, a determined would always have his way. But it was better than nothing.

Guy opened the seat and pulled out a light-refracting camouflaged parka. Light, thin, somewhat comfortable.

Blondies aren't Midas Security Forces, Guy. They're way out of your league or mine.

Not that he was fighting against those words from Riki, but it was best to be prepared for contingencies.

The parka would take in the streetlights of Midas and make Guy harder to spot on security cams. At least, that was the idea.

Guy pulled out black leather gloves from a pocket and slid the right one on. In the palm was embedded a pneumatic tranquilizer.

Guy tightened the strap and walked towards Genova.

The aeroshuttles making the rounds of Midas, unlike the cabs which demanded memstick payment and ID verification, weren't choosy about passengers. Even if one of them was a slumdog hidden in the gaggle of tourists.

It was because of these aeroshuttles that slumdogs could go anywhere in most areas with impunity, a fact lost on most residents of Midas.

As far as the eye could see it was an ocean of artificial light. The

darkness receded in the face of colors that tantalized the senses.

Turning his back on the crowds, Guy walked briskly.

Before him was a derelict pharmacy, the one that stocked nothing but cheap supplements. No customers went in and out. But Guy was patient.

Today was Wednesday. Riki would step out. Or should.

It wasn't a random guess. Riki was exact in matters of time. Even before what happened in Apatia, that was clear.

Guy had no idea what was going on inside the pharmacy, but Riki didn't pay any attention to the explosion of holographic billboards inviting him to experience every sort of sexual pleasure right in front of him.

He left Apatia, and returned. Like clockwork, Riki never stopped anywhere to eat, screw off, none of that.

Why?

Guy was curious. Because none of this made any sense.

Why?

The answer was made clear that day, in that room. By Iason.

That Riki had invisible chains around him. Guy could not forget what he saw. Even if he wanted to, it was seared into his memory. Just thinking about it made him grit his teeth.

It was at that moment Riki emerged from the doorway.

Guy moved at once.

Midas. Where night and day remain unchanging.

1900 hours. Riki finished his tasks for the day and left the pharmacy.

As he did, it was as if the night air took him by the neck.

The door to the pharmacy was specially treated for climate control. The temperature on each side was drastically different.

In Eos, environmental controls kept the temperature the same no matter the day. Here in Midas there were seasons, the presence of which gave Riki relief rather than annoyance. Even in the same cage, between Eos and Apatia there was a world of difference. Riki knew that. *Well, I guess I'm hungry.* Riki decided to return home to eat right away.

It was then that he saw a figure rapidly approaching in a hooded parka. Guy. There was no hiding it was Guy no matter what he was wearing. Not to Riki.

Riki's heart stopped.

And then all the lights went out except right in front of him.

Riki could feel his pulse hammering in his ears as the light receded from his eyes. All that filled his rapidly dimming vision was the figure of Guy, as if he was lit by a spotlight.

"Riki." The eyes were unforgiving and the voice hard.

Apparently it wasn't just nervousness. Riki peeled something off his shoulder. What was it?

Guy smiled. "Let's go have a round."

"Go home." Riki had no intention of talking about it.

"Just come along." Guy's left hand took Riki's arm.

"Let go," Riki said in earnest. "You're going too far." He tried to shake Guy's hand away.

Guy put his right hand on Riki's neck. A sharp pain. Riki winced.

Vertigo.

Guy whispered in his ear. "It's not over yet, Riki."

"What?"

Riki's vision went dark and he collapsed into Guy's arms.

Pain. Nausea. Pain again.

It felt like he was being swallowed into something. Like he was in a whirlpool being dragged down.

No sensation in legs or hands. There was no sense of being here.

Was this a dream or reality?

Just breathing hurt.

Riki's throat burned. His body felt like lead but the sensations were crisp. It was like a bad trip.



Cold chills down the back. Eyelids heavy. Eyeballs felt like they

were being crushed. Something crawling just under the skin.
Couldn't even speak.

And then Riki saw light at the edge of his red-tinged sight, shooting like arrows into his retina. Like his eye socket was being gouged out. Riki turned his head and gritted his teeth.

Pain.

Burning pain.

Heavy.

Numbness.

What is this?

It was nothing but vertigo. Riki wanted to heave. He brought it under control.

"How do you feel?" The voice sounded distant.

Guy.

He remembered now. The street. Guy standing in front of him. Everything going black.

"What... do... you think."

Riki forced the words out of his throat. Considering how quickly he went down, it must have been an extremely powerful quick-acting sedative. No doubt these were the side effects.

"Yeah, I figured as much." Guy chuckled low.

Riki went silent, fighting the rising tide of nausea.

"Aren't you going to ask? Where you are, what I'm going to do with you?"

Of course he was going to ask, after the nausea went down. "Water," Riki demanded in a parched voice.

First, hydration. Guy's footsteps closed in. "Here." With a bottle of mineral water in hand, Guy knelt and put a straw to Riki's lips.

As if he was prepared for something like this all along. Riki fought down a wave of anger and drank. He took the bottle and slowly rose up. The vertigo was gone. The nausea as well. He looked around.

Riki wanted to see where he was, but also wanted to avoid looking at Guy. So he wouldn't start cursing him out.

It was bare, all right. The walls were ancient concrete. There was a feeling of cold everywhere. There was ventilation but the air felt musty. No windows. There was a solid door and a ventilation shaft. The single light in the ceiling was painfully bright.

Riki was sitting on an emergency mattress on the floor. The table and chair in the corner were portables.

"What is this place?"

"Dana-Burn. Underground bunker from the independence era."

Riki was speechless. He thought he would be in some nondescript building in the slums. Not Dana-Burn.

At the look of surprise in Riki's eyes, Guy smirked. "Here, no one will interrupt us. It's just as inaccessible as Nier Darts."

True.

It was an ancient building, but part of the reason it was still standing was that the construction was so vast it was exceedingly difficult to demolish. And so it was left to rot.

Because automated sentry systems still functioned in parts of the compound, it was like a deathtrap—or so the word went out. And stories of thrillseekers never coming out again were legion. Even if the truth was probably outright murder.

Enough of them to spread the word that the underground levels were filled with nothing but human bones. Guy continued, "If I

didn't go to this length, I would never have the chance to hear the truth out of you, right?"

Riki spat, "What fucking truth? Look, no matter how many times we go over this, nothing changes. I am Iason's fucking pet."

"Then just reset everything," Guy spoke in a low voice. "It's all his fault. I'll cut your chains, alright. If you can't, I will."

It's not that easy. Riki lowered his eyes. "You don't know."

"Know what?"

"What a Blondy's like."

After all that I went through, the disgrace and humiliation, why won't he understand? It was driving Riki crazy. His head hurt.

"What are you afraid of? What, just because he's a Blondy you're going to give up like that?"

It wasn't a matter of fear.

If it was that easy to give in, Riki wouldn't be here either. *Guy doesn't understand. He can't. No matter what he's told, he never will.*

Riki swayed to his feet. He thought it might be impossible, but he walked to the door and hit the access switch. Just as he thought, locked.

"If you get stomped, stomp right back. No matter who it is, hit 'em back with more of the same. That's Bison. Right? Bison."

As if the name of the now extinct street gang was a bludgeon. Riki winced. He was irritated at this crap going nowhere.

"What, being his fucktoy turned you out?"

Riki slammed both hands into the door. *WHAM.* The heavy echo of the metal spoke for him.

"It's locked until you cool down," said Guy calmly.

Riki put his back to the door and slid down.

Fucking bad.

Very bad.

Fuck.

Those were the words in his head looping over and over again. *I fucking need to do something. But what?* Riki felt his head going in circles. He ran his hands through his hair. Breathing alone was a struggle. "I didn't know you were this much of a fucking idiot, Guy. I'm not going to cool down."

Be calm.

Calm.

Nothing comes out of fighting back this way.

No matter how many times Riki told himself this, when he spoke he couldn't help but lash out. It was times like this he was envious of Katze's iron face. *Dammit.* Riki glared. "Guy, what you're doing is pissing on a Blondy's parade."

Guy twisted his lips in a wry sneer. "That's a laugh. You think a Blondy's going to go all out because someone snatched his pet?"

He will. Because even between the Biondies, no one is more fucking off the deep end than he is. Riki knew that by experience. Not that anyone here except Katze would know enough to believe him. "The pet ring has a tracking device embedded into it. Being found here is a matter of time."

If Iason found Riki hadn't returned to Apatia—he didn't want to think about it. Riki was a pet. It wasn't like when he was allowed to roam free in Ceres. He knew.

"Don't worry about it. The room is shielded. No tracking device is going to work down here."

What?

Riki felt something dark seize him.

Not being able to be located was going to look like betrayal to Iason and Katze. His heart stopped.

Leaving Eos for Apatia was just moving from one cage to another. But now that Riki thought about it, he was used to Apatia. He was surprised.

"You can't be fucking telling me you want to be his pet your entire fucking life, Riki?" Guy said in a low, venomous tone. As if this was the one thing Guy would not stand for.

"Do... they know about this? Guy?"

Riki had something he would never give in for as well. And that was bringing the old crew from Bison into this.

"None of them. It's just me, you and him."

"Even if this might end up like Kirie for all of them?"

Guy was silent.

Guy, the most rational and collected in the entire crew, putting everyone at risk. This Riki could not stand.

No doubt Guy was committed to this, but he was in way too deep. Because he didn't understand what a Tanagura Blondy—no, how absolutely lethal and beyond the pale of human behavior Iason could be when roused to anger.

When Katze took away Kirie in front of Riki, Guy protested. Even after what Kirie had done to the crew, Guy still had it in him to care.

Guy was doing the exact same thing Kirie did—baiting the tiger. All for Riki. But Guy had no idea what he was doing.

To extract information from Kirie with chemical interrogation was easy. To break his entire personality down and mindwipe him was not an issue for the Blondies. To a Blondy, slumdogs were lower

than insects. Even if only for the sake of convenience, a mindwipe was done without a second thought. That's how Blondies were. Ruthless.

Guy didn't know how deep in he was. Not a clue.

"You really want to know the truth that much, Guy?"

"Yeah, I want you to tell me. Every word. We've got plenty of time."

Guy's gaze cut like knives and met Riki's fiery glare, waiting for Riki to say everything that was on his mind. Unmoving.

Riki stood wordlessly and started undoing his clothes, throwing them down in defiance.

Guy stared in disbelief.

Riki threw down the last piece. What remained was a taut rippled body, with the vibrance of youth but none of the immaturity.

Maybe Guy felt the gap of four years. He was silent.

Or rather, maybe it was jealousy stirring.

On Riki's skin all over there were kiss marks illuminated by the ceiling light. They were as if a man had devoured his skin. At the root of his penis, a pet ring was visible.

It was known that the Blondies of Tanagura were augmented, the only concession to flesh being their brains. Jupiter created them to be the progenitors of a new humanity, the pinnacle of human beauty, strength and intellect, ever immortal. It was unthinkable for a Blondy—far beyond mortality—to bed a lowborn pet and enjoy it.

There was no desire for a Blondy. The only amusement they derived from sex was to watch the Bacchanalia.

Guy thought Iason kept Riki for the novelty of having a slumdog from Ceres as a sexual slave.

A tool for inflicting torture and asserting power. The pet ring was

only the warped manifestation of that desire.

But Guy didn't think there was actually sex between them.

"This is the truth you wanted to know. Take a good fucking look," Riki shot in anger.

Guy's eyes never wavered from each mark.

"Here. I just have to squeeze this and I shiver."

Riki pinched a nipple lightly.

It was the truth. Riki enjoyed the biting and the deep sucking on it, but he never wanted to face up to that. Until Iason pulled it out of him, Riki never thought there was any pleasure there.

With Guy it was all about affection, there was never any force or violence involved. If Guy wanted to penetrate there was never any hesitation. Foreplay didn't matter. Direct stimulation of the genitals was enough. Riki had thought that was all there was to sex.

But in Eos, to be tamed—Riki discovered depths and dimensions of pleasure unimaginable. Being teased until his body screamed in pain. Until his throat went numb and his mind went shock white. Thighs shivering, the hint of nectar on the tip of his shaft—but never allowed to orgasm.

Being violated by Iason's eyes over and over again. The humiliation.

But since moving to Apatia, it changed. Being embraced by Iason. Everything that felt like shame turned into pleasure.

"Here. And here. This is where I feel."

In Eos, the only Bacchanalia he was forced to attend was the first one. Being paraded in front of the Blondies, being cut apart and taken down.

"He makes me shiver all over my body."

It was no lie. Iason milked him dry, until his mind went blank and

his body was numb.

"I want my nuts massaged so I hold onto him. I want my erect nipples bitten so I put my chest out. When I have an erection he won't let me get off, so I go crazy and beg him. And then at the end he thrusts his hard, huge cock into me and I shake my hips on it."

Guy suppressed the urge to cover his ears and stared hard at Riki, searching for any sign of lies.

"I was tamed that way."

For Iason, there was no refusal possible. Sex and pleasure were on his command.

Being laid bare.

Broken.

Devoured.

But what was nothing but pain and humiliation turned into unimaginable, impossible pleasure. "I'm not fucking kidding you." There was no hiding the words, "Sex with Iason is a narcotic. When I don't have it, I want it. I start hurting for it. I can't fucking help it. At all."

The words were more truth than exaggeration.

When embraced by Iason, Riki felt like a lecherous pet. That he didn't want to be.

No.

Not like this.

This isn't me!

Struggling. Resisting, fighting against the impossible.

The eighteen months in Ceres after his escape from Eos was supposed to be detox. All it did was make him starve for Iason.

"As long as the pet ring's biting down into me, I'll keep on fucking him. You don't have any say in it," Riki spat the words at Guy.

If you value Guy, break it off, Katze said.

You took care of the matter? The light flickered in Iason's eyes.

Yeah, I know.

The frustration in his chest rose to his throat. What part of the words coming out of his mouth was truth and what part was exaggeration, Riki couldn't tell. "I'm a pet. And there's no changing that now."

"Are you... serious?"

"What, you fucking doubt me?" Riki shot back.

"So I was... wrong all along?" Guy's voice had an edge.

Riki felt the bite in those words and bit down on his lip. "That's right. You were fucking wrong. None of this was for my good at all!"

Guy shot up from the chair and took Riki in his hands. "Then I don't mean anything to you?" There was a hint of sadness and bitterness.

Riki felt Guy's fingers clawing into his shoulders. A wave of heat washed over him.

Don't tell me that.

Don't look at me with those eyes.

The words struggled to fight their way out of Riki. He swatted Guy's hands aside. "That's right! You don't. Don't make me tell you again!" Riki shouted.

A sharp pain on his cheek. His legs buckled.

Riki kept his eyes on Guy.

"Why? Why do you choose him over me?" Guy's voice was an

accusation. Or was it regret? "Do you... understand how old you are? You're 21. Twenty fucking one! How long do you think he'll keep you around? A Blondy from Tanagura can have anyone. He's just trying out something different. He's *using* you!"

I know that.

I know.

Even an Academy purebred could be sent to Raoul's lab. There was no telling what was in the future.

"I don't need you to tell me that."

"What, so you're going to suck on his cock until he gets bored with you?"

That's fine. The thought came unbidden to Riki's mind. The surprise shot into him. *What did I... just... think?* His heart stopped for a second.

Guy's anger washed over him. "I'm not having that. You hear me, Riki? I say no!"

"I'm telling you that I don't give a shit. Get over it, Guy. I'm through. Leave me the fuck alone."

It was then—

Guy embraced him.

"Whether they called you Vajra or running dog, you led our crew. You were everything. When we walked with you, everyone turned to watch. You know how proud we were? Do you?" Guy's voice was soft. His warmth. His heartbeat. His sincerity. Riki could feel it through his skin. "You never backed down. Every one of us loves you, Riki. You want to turn your back on that over... him? You want that?"

No!

Riki fought the urge to embrace Guy and deny the words.

But Riki knew if he didn't push Guy away now that things would get worse. Now was the chance. No matter if Guy hated Riki or not, this was the only way.

"I don't run Bison. Bison's gone, Guy. Gone. And I'm not your lover anymore. I'm Iason's pet."

"No!"

"It's true. I chose it, Guy."

There was an invisible chain around his neck. Riki could not deny it. Life now was freedom with a price.

Riki had sworn to rise out of the slums. He always thought there was a chance, but even Katze was enslaved to fate. But there was still choice to be had. And Riki resolved to use it.

By sending Guy away.

And even if that meant becoming Iason's pet—choosing so—and even if that was nothing but a betrayal of Bison and everything Riki went through, this was it. Because the alternative was destruction of everything.

Riki pushed at Guy's hands. Guy tightened his grip.

"I don't care if you never run Bison again. I don't care if you're... not my lover anymore. But don't become his pet!" The fire in those words was undeniable. "I won't stand for it. Not him. I won't stand for you being his slave. His toy." Guy spoke in a low voice full of pain. "I won't let you say anything otherwise. He came at me first, held me hostage. I want payback. Even if it scares the fuck out of me going up against him, I want him to pay."

This wasn't the Guy that Riki knew.

Riki struggled against his grip.

"I'm going to make you come to terms, Riki." Guy took Riki's crotch in his hand. Hard. "You can't leave him because of this, right?" Guy's fingers gripped the pet ring. "Then take it off."

What?

The pet ring?

Only Iason can. What's he talking about?

"If this fucking ring's not on you, then you're free." Guy stroked the pet ring and then squeezed Riki's cock. Harder. "Just take this whole thing off."

Riki stood speechless. It wasn't a joke. It wasn't sarcasm. It was for real.

Between Riki and Guy, there was an insurmountable distance. The feelings they had for each other were real. But they manifested in entirely different ways.

Riki's heart stopped.

His throat was dry. The thirst endless. He closed eyes.

Chapter 9

Tanagura.

What served as Iason's office was linked thoroughly to the neural network. Elegant yet functional, it served as the pinnacle of machine artistry.

Iason lay in his recliner, eyes closed. As if he was one with the machinery of the room. His ethereal beauty did not give the impression of life. His eyes, the expression of his will, gave no light. Iason was not asleep.

Around Iason, holodisplays ran datastreams continuously. Lights flickered, to be replaced by darkness, then light. Graphs and projections swirled across the space.

One by one each of the holodisplays shut down. The room fell silent. The neural jack in Iason's brow disconnected.

Iason's augmented brain was able to directly connect to the neural network and process exabytes of data per microsecond, beyond that of the normal brain.

Iason slowly opened his eyes. His eyes gleamed with intelligence and will.

No one was there to see any of this. It was just a routine check of messages at first. What made him open his eyes was one emergency message from Katze, dated one hour prior.

The coded signal from Katze was priority, unlike normal. Iason thought it might be something to do with the underworld. His eyes narrowed.

When patched through, Katze's face appeared in the holodisplay. As if he was waiting.

"Lord Iason, forgive me for this intrusion."

"Report."

"Riki has gone missing."

Iason's eyes burned. "Since when?"

"Contact was lost with him at least one hour ago."

It was already 2200. Taking into account the established schedule, that meant there was a three-hour window.

Iason knew working under Katze doing routine work like warehousing and shipments grated on Riki's nerves. But that was something Iason let Katze decide entirely. Perhaps Riki was just blowing off steam.

As if anticipating the reply, Katze spoke. "He is not responding to calls to either the Apatia residence or his wristphone."

This meant that the tracking device in Riki's wristphone was nonfunctional. Iason became concerned.

"Is there anywhere else he could have gone?"

"No, my lord."

"Would he be somewhere for pleasure?"

"Absolutely not." It was a quick response from Katze. "What is your will?"

Iason's reply was crisp. "I will inquire myself." If Riki had already left Katze's sight, there was no telling where he could have gone.

Katze started to speak, but thought better of it. It was obvious he was shaken.

"There is no need for you to move at this time, Katze," Iason commanded. "This is a private matter. Leave yourself out of it."

"I understand, my lord."

Iason cut the connection and linked the pet control ring to a

holodisplay.

There was no sign of Riki's pet ring. *No signal? What could it be?*
Iason narrowed his brow.

He rechecked. No change. This was unexpected.

Iason had no concern that Riki's wristphone was nonfunctional. While it would raise suspicion, it was possible to ditch or destroy the wristphone.

But the pet ring was different. It was the means to control Riki absolutely. It was only removable by Iason. It was a means to track him anytime, anywhere. But the signal was dead.

Impossible.

How?

No answer.

Because it was impossible.

Riki would never disappear of his own accord, so it was no doubt something entirely unexpected.

It would appear this is urgent.

Iason's eyes narrowed.

At that moment in Midas, Area 1.

Katze's hidden office was arranged with the fastidiousness expected of Blondie furniture. After Iason cut the connection, Katze's expression was dark as he lit a cigarette.

Three hours ago, Riki was here. Without change, without complaint he'd finished his assigned work. Katze had no intention of letting Riki do anything else after he was done he walked out to return to Apatia.

Five years ago, Riki was just another slumdog. But now he was different, Riki and Katze both knew.

But he was gone.

Idiot!

Katze looked up with a start. *Guy and his crew know where Riki is!* He was stunned he didn't think of this before. *How much do they know?* Katze didn't know but considering the extent of the incident, there was no doubt that all could be considered compromised.

That Guy and the other slumdogs would resort to this... no, it would've been Guy, who fought the most. That Riki mentioned this to Katze only meant that it had been pushed to the brink.

Between Riki and Guy, only the two of them could figure it out. But if Katze intervened, it would end badly. And with this disappearance, that was assured.

This is a private matter. Leave yourself out of it.

Iason's words cut as if to emphasize this was no concern of his, and as such Katze was unable to intervene. If Iason commanded it, Katze had no means to protest.

Katze was a stranger to this relationship between them.

Seeing it that way, Katze realized he was just an outsider. He gritted his teeth.

Tanagura.

The meeting of the Blondies in Jupiter Tower proceeded as planned. The massive holodisplay in the center blinked off and the meeting came to a close. The tension in the air lifted, but not by much.

"By the way, Iason, how is that slumdog of yours?" asked Gideon unexpectedly.

Three days since contact was lost with Riki. Asked without warning, Iason paused before answering. *Why now?* Iason felt irritation. The question couldn't have been coincidence. Perhaps Gideon had something to do with Riki's disappearance; Gideon was in charge of Midas, it was not outside the realm of possibility.

... *Or not.*

Iason dismissed the idea as quickly as it arose. To the other Blondies, Riki was a slumdog unworthy of their attention. His presence was only an eyesore to them, nothing more.

"What do you mean, Gideon?"

"Have you found the proper work for him?"

Raoul raised a brow. "Gideon, do you want to go over this now?"

About Riki going to Apatia, it had been endlessly debated. To talk about it again was poor form. Raoul's irritation was clearly visible.

"Only a matter of curiosity," Gideon replied.

Even if Riki was an eyesore, it was Riki—who caused such havoc in Eos, after all.

Seeing the other Blondies, who usually departed meetings immediately after their conclusion, remain seated watching the conversation unfold meant that Gideon was not the only curious one.

"The underworld is not so easy," Iason replied.

"Appearances can be deceiving, then?" Orphe interjected.

"Of course," Iason said. Incompetence and arrogance went nowhere in the underworld. No matter if Riki said being put out to pasture in the underworld was better than being a slave in Eos. It would be nothing but disgraceful for Iason for Riki to fail.

"Full of confidence, are we." Said Aisha with a stare.

"Are you saying Iason Mink has finally gone too far?" Said Raoul with a wry grin.

"You say that now," Aisha responded, no doubt expressing what the other Blondies thought. "Whether it is Eos or Apatia, it seems as if the slumdog is still caged, however."

"A leash only goes so far," Iason said levelly.

"So does the repute of a Blondy," Aisha countered. "Letting any scandal involving a slumdog leak outside is no doubt an incredible disgrace."

Why say this now?

Iason's suspicions were raised again by Gideon's words. Though maybe it was reading into it too far.



Chapter 10

The west end of Ceres.

Guy raced his aerobike down the avenue, deftly dodging the trees along the road.

It was as if he was in a racing battle. But this was different from fighting other aerobikes in a death race. If this was an aerocar, Guy could have easily gone over treetop level. But an aerobike didn't have the power output.

This was once where the revolutionaries of Dana-Burn celebrated their independence, their victory.

Nothing of that remained now.

Ceres became a slum. Depopulated, the vines and trees of the Green Belt took over these streets.

The road was barely clear enough for an aerobike to travel. The area was given over to nature, choked with trees. Just faintly visible beyond the trees were the white towers of the Guardians. Guy paid them no mind and kept riding at high speed.

Guy's objective was a derelict building. It was once a warehouse of some sort, and despite its small size it housed a generator. The exterior was crumbling, but underground it housed a fortified bunker from the independence era virtually intact.

The locks on the door were state of the art. This in itself was out of the ordinary.

Guy parked the aerobike and stepped off. With a familiar touch he entered the key code and unlocked the door. He descended to the third underground level in what was once a cargo elevator.

At the very end, there was a door. Guy entered it.

It was somewhat clean, but had only the bare essentials for

habitation. A bed, table, chair and a refrigerator.

On the bed, Riki was asleep. Guy placed his satchel on the table and walked over to Riki. Confirming that nothing was out of place, Guy breathed a quiet sigh of relief and placed a soft kiss on his cheek.

Returning to the table, Guy took a datalink from the satchel and powered it on, activating a holodisplay.

It was the blueprint for Dana-Burn. Guy stared for a long time, searching.

Contented sighs.

Cries of pleasure.

An endless sea of artificial light.

This evening in Midas was no different from any other.

Iason's aerocar descended on the roof and came to a halt.

The private elevator stopped at the 53rd floor and Iason stepped out, face framed by silver hair and a datavisor. He was in the same clothes he always wore when coming to Apatia.

A week since Riki's disappearance. Iason's features betrayed a faint hint of vexation. He stepped into Riki quarters.

The room itself was a shambles. Which was just like Riki, but it made his absence all the more incongruous, as if his disappearance was out of his control.

There was nothing in the room to indicate why he disappeared or how. No reports of any accident had surfaced in Midas.

The security grid on Midas itself drew a blank trying to trace Riki. Fixed surveillance had blind spots and limits. The search function on Iason's control ring indicated that Riki was last on the grid at 1923 hours in the Tilma District. According to Katze, Riki's

wristphone was also found there.

It was as if Riki never existed. Whatever plan had been carried out, it was thorough.

Offworld? The thought crossed Iason's mind for the briefest second before he dismissed it as farfetched.

If all this was targeted at Iason, it would come as no surprise. While Iason himself was not in the habit of making enemies, he had uncountable numbers of enemies. Even those who wanted to do away with Blondies in Tanagura.

But other than during the foundation of Tanagura, there had never been any attempt at assassinating a Blondy. Not in the last hundred years at least.

For humans, death is permanent, but for an augmented immortal like a Blondy replacement bodies were simply manufactured. Even personality and memory could be duplicated and housed in an AI. And thus it was pointless to even think about assassinating a Blondy.

But there was no end to the espionage being conducted in Tanagura nonetheless, collecting information, whether it was dignitaries or hidden away in the swarms of tourists descending on Midas, or even amongst the refugees.

This was, of course, under the control of Gilbert, outside of Iason's purview.

There was no guarantee that the details of relationship between Iason and Riki were not known outside, even if Iason ruled the syndicate governing the underworld with an ice-cold fist. That Iason kept a slumdog itself was beyond imagining.

Raoul said it was a disgrace.

Katze said it was a vulnerability.

Keeping Riki as a pet and moving him to Apatia, and then putting him to work in the underworld. Even if Jupiter voiced no concerns

over any of this, Iason did think on occasion that he was testing its patience.

But Iason himself chose this remarkably human relationship between himself and Riki. To not worry about the eyes of others but to spend time with him, in a human sense.

Iason returned to the living quarters and sank deep into the sofa, playing with the control ring.

Was it a challenge? Some sort of blackmail attempt? Or something else?

That there was no sign of who was behind Riki's disappearance or why was enough to cause doubt. That there were no options available vexed Iason.

No demands, just waiting. The irritation struck at Iason's head like a chisel.

Midas. The city that never sleeps.

Despite being on the fringes of the Galan star system, every sort of subspecies of humanity imaginable walked in Midas. Language, religion, values. None of it mattered. This was a place where pleasure was bought with cash.

As long as the rules of Midas were kept, all was well.

Guy cut through the crowds and entered a network booth. The clear glass became opaque and sound dampeners kicked in, making it secure.

Guy plugged in his datalink and searched for a certain room in Apatia. He enabled voice mode.

The holoterminal chimed in the living room.

Iason opened his eyes and walked rapidly to it. No name was visible on the origin of the call, but a code: Z-107M. Riki's pet ID from Eos.

What could it mean? Was it a taunt? Blackmail? Some sort of signal? Iason activated call reception. No holodisplay emerged; it was a vox call. "Identify yourself."

There was a strange silence.

"Riki?" Iason asked.

"Too bad for you, it isn't."

Iason's face hardened. "What have you done with Riki?"

"I want to return something to you." Guy's low tone was remorseless.

"Where is he?" Iason demanded.

"Let's put an end to this. Wednesday, 1500 hours. The entrance to Dana-Burn. Don't be late." The call ended.

"Guy." Iason's voice was like death, his face without expression. As if there was nothing human to it. Come to think of it, after that incident in Apatia, Iason should have suspected Guy right away. But the thought never crossed his mind.

Why?

Because Iason thought nothing of slumdogs, or the possibility that any of them would actually have the audacity to do such a thing.

The Kirie incident and Zico. And then crashing Iason's residence at Apatia was nothing short of reckless, but it was bold for slumdogs.

But after coming face to face with Iason, they should have backed down. Or so he thought. After all, everyone wanted to survive. Even Bison. Kirie should have served as a warning.

But apparently slumdogs were not inclined to heed warnings.

Instead of sending a message through datalink, Guy took the time to send a vox call and communicate the threat in private. It was a direct insult to Iason.

I see that I have been presented with a challenge.

The faint hint of a smile rose on Iason's lips.

Guy terminated the vox call and sighed. He didn't expect a showdown this quickly.

"Can't say I didn't ask for it."

Guy had no pity for himself. It was only a matter of time before it came to this.

Wristphones in Ceres were only effective there, not in the rest of Midas. The entire district was cut away from the neural network. Active jammers kept any and all signals from coming out.

Guy was careful to dispose of Riki's wristphone immediately. Unable to remove the pet ring on the spot, he slapped an ECM shielding device on Riki and transported him straight to Dana-Burn.

To leave a vox message in Apatia, Guy had to step out in Midas to send the call. His intent was to simply leave a message. At least, that was the original plan. Having Iason answer the vox call was unexpected.

Guy shook a little.

When Iason asked for Riki, his voice shifted softly. It infuriated Guy. It was like Scarface talking about Riki with familiarity.

The three years of Riki's absence which Guy knew nothing about. The Blondy who kept Riki for himself those three years. The one who enslaved Riki and toyed with him. Guy felt the onrush of a headache.

The die was cast.

There was no turning back now.

Chapter 11

The west side of Ceres.

The light of day struggled to fight through the black forest.

Guy's current hideout lay underneath the branches.

No one but Guy knew of its existence, the building itself purged from memory long ago, the basement levels beyond the reach of sunlight.

Guy walked to the figure of Riki asleep on the mattress. Parting his forelocks, he kissed Riki's cheek.

Letting out a deep sigh, resolve unshaken, he left the room.

That same day.

Iason uploaded all information available on Dana-Burn into his augmented memory and took his aerocar down the underground Karaza network.

Iason knew he could take the aerocar on the surface straight to Dana-Burn, but that would trigger the security grid, bringing Midas Security Forces to him. This he wanted to avoid.

This incident was personal and not for public eyes.

The Karaza network were secret passageways traversing the length and breadth of Tanagura, linking emergency shelters and escape routes, known only to a select few.

The sleek aerocar's interior lines accommodated Iason's height as he stepped into it. As the door latch engaged, a holoterminal waited patiently for ID. As Iason waved his hand over it, the aerocar sensed the embedded datalink, confirmed authorization and started the engine.

"Midas. Area 7, Harvey."

Seated, Iason issued crisp instructions. The interior lights dimmed and the aerocar moved forward as the seat automatically reclined.

From Tanagura to Midas, the aerocar flowed down the dark tunnel. The color-coded lights along the route lit yellow, then changed to blue, and finally gave way to red. The aerocar stopped shortly afterwards.

Midas. Area 7, Harvey, the navsystem on the aerocar intoned. The door opened.

Iason stepped out.

Area 7, Harvey, was a special district reserved for recuperation, stocked with medical facilities.

With machine bringing man under domination, to all humanity Tanagura was the symbol of fear and oppression. Even if wholesale genocide was not the reality, the possibility of it remained. The machine was to be feared, and destroyed.

Artificial Intelligence dominated the galaxy, ever expanding its reach. No life for humanity was possible without it.

And so fear of an AI named "The Creator" spread across the galaxy, entire worlds in terror of its approach.

The avowed neutrality of Tanagura was all the more fearsome because its strength was not in military or political might, but control of technology and manipulation of life itself.

Every religion has laws governing its conduct, an ideology to its own. Tanagura's refusal to believe in any of that through sheer might of its control of life was undeniable.

To spare nothing in the pursuit of the secrets of the universe was a matter of fact to the Blondies. It was nothing for the likes of Raoul to descend on a world dying under a viral pandemic and bring the full might of the technology of Tanagura to bear. To the dying, no doubt Raoul was truly divine.

That Raoul's motives were entirely devoid of compassion was meaningless to consider. Raoul's science rendered religion futile.

There was no promise of an afterlife, no reliance on the uncertainties of faith, only unshakable conviction in the might of technology. That was Tanagura.

Area 7, Harvey.

For the citizens of Midas, this was where every one of them hoped to live out the twilight years of their lives. Free of uncertainties and care, where only a few dozen were permitted entry each year.

Close inspection would reveal that the blissful faces of the residents did not remain there for long, their numbers culled through euthanasia to make room for more.

If Dana-Burn represented the end of hopes of the independence of man over machine and the expression of free will, Harvey was a place of peaceful contented death, separated from each other by a thick high wall of bonded alloys.

The contrast between the immaculate architecture of Harvey and the blasted landscape overrun by trees of Dana-Burn was jarring.

Harvey was quiet.

1453 hours. Entrance to Dana-Burn.

Silence.

Past glories, hopes and dreams, mocked by the ruins and implacable time.

Iason stood at the appointed place.

As long as he knew it was Guy behind this plot, Iason was certain there would be a reckoning. All that remained was to wait for Guy

to move.

As the time passed 1500, Guy emerged from the shadows.

"I see you decided to show," Iason said with a hint of irony.

"I'm not as twisted as you are."

"Taking away my pet without my permission is not?"

"Riki came of his own free will," Guy spat.

"Impossible. Whether you threatened or begged him, Riki would never have gone with you. Not unless he was unconscious," Iason said without blinking. It was not hard to see it was close to the truth.

Riki wouldn't be concerned for his own safety but that of Guy and the other Bison members. Iason knew that Riki would never put any of them at risk. Riki knew full well what Iason was capable of in anger.

"You sound sure of yourself." Guy narrowed his brow.

"I have every reason to be. You already saw why."

Iason had imprinted Riki through the pain of the pet ring and unspeakable pleasures under his own hand. But Iason knew despite the effort put into taming Riki that Riki was wild and untamable. That was what endeared him to Iason. Not that he would ever put it into words.

It took Iason three years to bring Riki to heel, but Riki was beholden to the slums.

To what he wanted to protect.

To what he wanted to not lose.

To whom he wanted to be loved by.

Guy didn't know the extent of Riki's love for him. Were he aware,

he would never have resorted to kidnapping. Not that Iason was going to enlighten him.

Guy glared at Iason with undisguised hate. To Guy, Iason's attitude was smug and arrogant to the extreme.

But while Guy understood that the Blondies ruled Tanagura, he did not fully understand the true nature of that rule. Riki did and paid for it with his freedom.

Iason had his own reasons for bringing this to an end.

To not bring down the wrath of Jupiter.

To allay the concerns of Raoul and the other Blondies.

And above all, in the name of his reputation as the ruler of the underworld.

The option of liquidating Riki for his own security had been discarded by Iason long ago. For a Blondy, pride was an absolute value. There was no hesitation, no doubt. So Iason embraced his downfall willingly, to surrender to emotion. To be human.

And so Iason answered Guy's challenge. It was imperative to destroy this threat before it got any bigger.

Guy hesitated. Then, with a glare of hatred, he gestured. Iason started walking.

No sign of human life remained in Dana-Burn as the two stepped into the emptiness. Guy stared straight ahead, not bothering to turn around. Iason's gaze on Guy's back was made of rock.

Five minutes down a broken side street, there was a square, low, windowless building. One rusted gate was open. The security code was off. Faded signs warned trespassers. Guy and Iason stepped in.

Dim illumination linked to motion sensors greeted their appearance in the halls sloping downwards. The sound of their footsteps echoed.

On arrival at the third underground level, Guy activated a switch on the wall. He repeated the process at a steel shutter, and at a junction where they turned right. And at the final door, Guy gestured forward with his jaw.

Iason entered the room.

Guy followed and locked the door behind him.

Done.

He breathed a sigh.

Iason scanned the room. Faded concrete walls. A single chair, a table, a mattress on the floor. A bottle of empty mineral water. Signs of life.

He turned to Guy. "Surely you did not imprison Riki here."

"Slumdogs don't belong in Apatia."

"Riki suits being pet to a Blondy admirably."

Iason would never have let Riki leave Eos if he'd had the chance. Apatia was outside of Iason's direct authority. When Guy and the others made their intrusion, that was evident. And now this.

"How much will you sell him to me for?" Guy asked, hands in his pockets.

"You are mistaken. It is how much I will *pay* for him. Is that not what a kidnapper demands?"

Guy's wordless look was full of hate.

Regardless of Guy's motives, to Iason he was but a kidnapper, nothing more and nothing less. "And you told me you wanted to return something to me that was mine."

Guy remained silent.

"Wealth? Position? Or do you want an Official ID?" Iason knew that

Guy didn't care for any of these things, but in return for Riki, Iason was prepared to pay anything. The most important thing was to ensure his safety. Everything else came after.

Guy didn't bother to mask his irritation.

"When Kirie sold you to me, he was forthright in his requests. It was much easier." Even if Kirie didn't know what he was getting into at all. His arrogance had cost him. "There is no need for complication. You have Riki. It is your move."

Guy shifted. "How noble of you. I didn't think things were going to end up like this."

Iason stared.

"I thought you'd invoke your authority and throw Midas Security Forces into Ceres like you did with Kirie, or you'd bring heavies here after me. I was curious what you'd do."

It was clear to Iason that Guy did not understand the real meaning behind what happened to Kirie.

"Riki tried to warn me. Said anything I did was just a slap in the face to you. That it'd only make that Blondy pride of yours flare up."

Iason inwardly laughed. Riki was ever Riki. Thinking of what must have been the exchange between Riki and Guy, Iason was content.

"So I told him that he'd changed. Become your toy. That you'd ruined him." Guy's lips were taut in anger. Rage swirled around him. It was like seeing Riki but different.

The cocksure attitude, the absolute confidence in self. It was a mirror image of Riki. It said everything about why they were lovers. Once.

A sharp pain struck deep inside Iason's heart. It wasn't an illusion. It was impossible for Iason's cybernetic body to feel pain. But Iason registered pain.

Impossible.

Undeniable.

"You think I'm stupid, don't you? A slumdog like me picking a fight with a Blondy?" Guy glared at Iason.

"Well, even a slumdog has fangs." Iason knew this. This unquenchable defiance was what Iason savored the most in Riki.

"I'm willing to bet my life on it."

Iason did not understand what drove Guy to such recklessness.

"I applaud your courage. Or should I say, folly."

"I should say the same. You took what was dearest to me in my life."

"Enough of this. Where is Riki?"

"Don't rush things. I have plenty of questions to ask you."

Iason wondered if Guy was trying to buy time or get a rise out of him. The light in his eyes was contemptuous. "Your questions are a waste of my time. Where are you hiding Riki?"

"Why do you think it's a waste?"

Iason raised his hand in response. His control ring pulsed in flashes, signaling Riki's pet ring was close.

Guy leered. "So that's how it is. No wonder you had Riki under your boot."

How is it he has this attitude? At a time like now? Iason couldn't read him. Not that it mattered. "I see this is going nowhere."

Guy's tone was mocking. "Really now."

Without blinking Iason stepped forward and snatched Guy's shirt. Twisting his wrist in a vicious motion, Iason lifted Guy off his feet. Guy writhed in his grip, turning red.

"I see the only language you understand is pain."

Iason let go of Guy with a thud. Guy struggled to breathe, tears of pain flashing in his eyes.

"Even if you are a slumdog, surely you still value your own life. Cross me once again and I will hang you."

The voice was low and heavy with threat. "Return him to me. *Now.*"

Wiping a dribble off his chin, Guy crawled under the table. Taking the box taped underneath, he threw it at Iason's feet.

A simple blue box.

Iason glanced up. "What do you think you are doing?" He picked it up. It looked like any case for pharmaceutical supplements found in Midas. Except that Guy threw it at Iason's feet for whatever reason.

He opened the case. His eyes widened in disbelief. It was an expression unimaginable on him.

Guy grinned in exultation. It was this face he wanted to see. This alone was enough for Guy.

And when the case was opened, it sent a pulse signal to initiate a countdown which could not stop.

Inside the case was Riki's pet ring.

It was the genuine article. The D-Type customized pet ring Iason had manufactured. Forged of a special alloy, not even a laser scalpel could mar its surface. Only Iason could remove it—

Unless the penis it was wrapped around was cut.

Iason blanched.

No.

Impossible.

Iason stared at the contents of the box in stunned silence.

Guy's words cut through Iason's thoughts in mockery. "I told you I'd

return what's yours. Riki doesn't belong to you anymore. If you need a pet to keep you warm at night, find another one."



Iason's hands on the box shook. His teeth gritted. The anger rising

in him was palpable. The sensations threatened to overload his cortex. He was never so enraged as he was now.

"Treated to resist even a laser scalpel, right? As long as that was on Riki, he was never going to be free. Oh, I took care of that alright. Don't worry, it's intact. When I took it off, I made sure of that." Guy's face contorted in ridicule. "For you to keep Riki in Apatia as your pet until you got bored of him and cast him aside? Not while I live."

Iason's eyes shone with madness. "*Then die.*"

"So will you. I'll never let you have Riki. Ever," Guy spat.

But as soon as the words left him, Guy found it impossible to rise to his feet. Not because of the choking from earlier. But because the expression on Iason's face was of such unbelievable fury.

A slumdog has his pride, or so Guy had thought. But the sight of Iason was unbelievable. He'd wanted to see Iason's true self, under the veneer. He was never expecting this.

How could a machine have that look?

A tremendous kick in the chest. He felt ribs break. Guy tried to scream. Nothing came out. Blood dripped from his lips.

Iason kicked Guy in the head sharply, to bring his face up. Until Guy confessed, Iason had no intention of letting him die quickly. Iason stepped on Guy's face and ground his cheek under his heel. "Tell me Riki's whereabouts."

He took Guy's wrist in his hand and twist it sharply. Pain and fear shot through Guy. Iason's hand moved. The joint snapped.

Guy screamed.

Iason watched him without blinking an eyelash. The fury was cold as ice.

"Riki's whereabouts. Now."

Guy spat a response flecked with blood. "I won't let you have him. I'm taking you with me."

He fell unconscious. And then—

A low and deafening roar. The onrush of an explosion.

It cannot be.

Iason stared at Guy in disbelief.

Chapter 12

When Riki came to, he licked his parched lips. And then felt the pain in his throat.

It was as if he was waking from a dream, but he had no idea what the dream was. Drugged by Guy, his head spun around. Riki had no sense of time in the windowless room.

Is it morning? Afternoon? Night?

The room was pitch black and silent.

Riki took a breath and reached for his crotch.

His hand felt nothing. Nothing at all.

He held his breath.

Guy's words were emotionless. *Cat's a black market surgeon, but he's first rate. Don't worry Riki, you'll get used to it.*

Riki already knew that the surgery was a hack job. And that there was no telling if Cat was going to keep quiet. Not that it mattered now, but Riki couldn't help but think about it.

But to think that being drugged unconscious against his will—it was all over like that.

It was what came from not settling things with Guy from the start.

Riki remembered when Katze took Kirie away during the raid on Ceres, and then Kirie being turned into an Alita—his personality overwritten into that of an automaton by Raoul. It served him right; Kirie brought it all on himself.

But Guy... *Guy*.

He'd followed Riki into the darkness. There was no denying the fault of it.

Riki hated Kirie. The cocksure arrogance of Kirie grated on his nerves. Just the sight of him or to hear his voice was the height of irritation.

Because seeing Kirie... seeing Kirie reminded him too much of himself when he was young.

He was different from Kirie. But there was no denying the outcome of their actions was the same for Guy.

Riki knew his limits. Knew how implacable and insurmountable Iason's will was. It was all Riki's fault. Riki had no intention of trying to fool himself. He had few choices to call his own, but no regrets.

But the feeling that somewhere, somehow Riki chose terribly wrong couldn't escape him.

Time wouldn't stand still.

But Guy had every intention of making it so.

As long as there is a will, there's a way. Maybe Guy really believed in this. But Guy never came face to face with absolute power in the person of Iason.

There were things unsettled with Guy, things which had carried on far too long. Riki had paid for it with his manhood in the flesh, cut away from him.

Katze said it: that when people lose something truly of themselves, they go crazy.

You can't leave him because of this damn ring, right?

Yes.

The pet ring was a bond between Iason and Riki.

Without this ring you're free.

No.

There was a time when Riki was convinced it was so, but since moving to Apatia he knew the pet ring was nothing but a symbol. Between Riki and Guy, the pet ring meant different things.

Then take it all off.

Riki remembered the chill of hearing those words and bit down on his lip.

He didn't care to be bitter. Everything was his fault. He felt that keenly enough. But that didn't explain how this all came to pass.

Guy didn't understand what Iason was capable of. Even Riki had an incomplete grasp of how a Blondy thought, but the fear of Iason's power and Iason's possessive dominance of him was etched into his flesh. As much as Riki writhed in guilt, he had no desire to relive that pain.

Riki knew that whatever he didn't know was best left unknown. He knew that things would come to a reckoning.

He wished there was a way out. For Guy. And maybe for himself.

Katze would probably figure out where he was, and realize Guy was involved. It was a matter of time before Iason set foot here.

Just because nothing happened today didn't mean tomorrow was going to end the same way.

Even if Iason missed some things, Katze caught on to everything in Riki's mind.

What if Iason knew... everything? Just thinking about it made his head hurt. His mind spiraled into fear and loathing.

Riki couldn't stop thinking about Guy and the others.

Maybe it wasn't too late.

What, now?

Everything was too late. The reality of it was far too clear to deny.

Riki glanced down and saw the pet ring gone. His penis, surgically removed.

Maybe it was the drugs. Riki couldn't tell reality from delusion and his thoughts swirled crazily. But he couldn't stop thinking. Even about things there was no use thinking about.

There was no turning back the clock now. Because otherwise there would be nothing left to live for.

On the table, Riki saw a digital sheet with a message from Guy. *I'm going to Dana-Burn to get something. I might be late. Take your meds.* It was dated three hours prior.

Riki sighed.

Rising, he emptied a bottle of mineral water, then reached for a boot at the foot of his mattress.

What now? Riki paused, hesitating. Finally, he slid the heel one way and revealed a hidden button. It was an emergency transponder on a wavelength receivable in either Ceres or Midas by Katze.

Riki paused again for only a brief moment before he hit the switch.

The transponder pulsed dimly. Riki slid the heel back into place.

Midas. Area 8, Sasan.

Katze was in his office, waving reams of data through the holodisplay as usual.

Then, an ID number pulsed on the edge of his vision in red. *A distress signal?* Katze knew the ID number by heart. *Riki?*

He shot up, startled.

He waved his work to one side and brought up a map of Midas. A complete one, with all the Areas marked to include Ceres, which was coded in a different color. The distress signal was coming from

there. But there was nothing in that location.

Katze checked telemetry data and saw no sign of any habitation.
He's in the Green Belt?

He stared at the map in disbelief.

With a wave of his arm, he shut down the holodisplay and ran out of the room.

Green Belt. Guy's hideout.

Three floors underground.

Riki heard the door sound an intrusion alarm. The high-pitched wailing ceased and the door slid open.

No one was on the other side.

Just as quickly, Katze entered the room with a laspistol at the ready. Riki, seated in the only chair in the room, met his eyes.

Confirming the room was clear, Katze holstered the laspistol inside his coat and walked rapidly to Riki.

"You idiot!" Katze yelled. Startled at his voice, Riki widened his eyes. "You have no idea the sort of trouble you've caused!"

Riki had no words to reply.

"Who was behind this? Guy?" Just saying Guy's name first meant Katze essentially knew everything. "Weren't you set on taking care of this?"

"That's why I called you."

"After 10 days?"

Katze's brutal words stung Riki.

It had been impossible for him to find an opening to contact Katze

even if he'd wanted to, but Riki had no choice but to keep silent.

"I don't know what Guy did to lock you up here, but it had to be amateurish. You obviously had to know that."

Riki answered, "When someone like Guy sets his mind on something, there's no telling how far off the tracks he'll go. You want me to reason with that?"

No matter what Riki said Katze would rebuke him. The words were spoken, but the understanding wasn't there. Just raising his voice exhausted Riki. There was no middle ground. "How is Iason?" Riki asked. This was what he most wanted to know.

"Why don't you see for yourself?" Katze replied coldly.

"Because I can't look into his eyes." The truth of it hurt Riki the most.

Katze impatiently grabbed Riki's jacket and threw it at him. "Hurry up."

"I can't... go back."

"Shut up and get dressed."

"I can't go back, Katze."

Katze flared up at Riki. "Are you kidding me? Is that what you want? Is your head filled with nothing but Guy?" He slammed his hands on the table.

The world spun around before Riki's eyes.

Only Riki could untangle this. Iason let Riki go to Guy in the year and a half after his escape from Eos because the issue could never be forced. Katze knew that everything depended on Riki. Everything.

But to see Riki hesitant, trapped in his memories of Guy, infuriated Katze.

That Iason would put his immortality, his very existence at risk for the concerns of slumdogs drove Katze to anger. That Riki and Guy would risk Iason's very life threw Katze into a burning rage.

Iason had the power of life and death over Riki, but Riki changed Iason. Guy was not part of the equation. That Guy, an outsider, would interfere between Master and Pet was unforgivable in Katze's eyes.

"No, Katze. You don't understand." Riki placed a hand on his crotch. "I've been castrated."

Katze narrowed his eyes. For a second, understanding eluded him.

"I'm like you now."

The meaning of it slammed into Katze.

"It was to remove the pet ring."

Only Iason could remove it. That's what Riki thought. And that's why he could never escape. And so Riki bound himself to Iason, through the pet ring.

But Guy... Guy's answer to that, to cut Riki's penis off entirely, was something Riki never considered.

"It finally came around to that."

Katze had thought that Riki was full of useless self-pity over Guy. It didn't occur to Katze in his anger that Riki... something like this could happen to Riki. *Dammit*. Katze was furious. This was beyond understanding. "That fool," he spat, undisguised hate in his words. It was clear to him now that Guy was more than a nuisance.

"I'm the one who drove him to this," Riki responded.

No. That's what Katze thought, but nothing would make Riki whole again.

"All I could think of was to push him away. Not just because you told me, but because I thought it was the only way to make things

right. I thought I could, and this is what became of it."

Katze averted his eyes.

"But maybe this is for the better, since I'm finally free of Iason, right?"

No. You understand that isn't so, Katze screamed inside. Just because Riki was castrated, it wouldn't end Iason's obsession with him. Riki underestimated the sort of presence he had in Iason's mind.

The only one concerned about this was Riki. To a slumdog, being a whole man was part of the mechanism for survival. Castration was as good as death. In the slums it was the ultimate insult, the worst form of revenge to have the testes crushed or the penis sliced off. It was the mark of defeat, the loss of manhood.

But it was the bond holding Iason and Riki together. Were Iason to learn of this, his rage would be monumental. Riki failed to understand that the pet ring was only a symbol; Iason would never forgive the castration. Katze knew this.

"I thought about it. Why Iason chose me when he could have any pet. Why me?"

That was a question everyone asked.

Why?

For a Blondy of Tanagura a pet was a status symbol, a reflection of refined taste and prestige. It was inconceivable to choose a slumdog. It was a denial of the awe and power that came with being a Blondy. *What made Iason so reckless?* If Katze hadn't observed Riki and his potential for so long up close, he would never have understood. Not as an outsider.

"When I was in Eos I thought I would never back down, never give in. Even in the last three years in Eos, I was a slumdog to all of them, but that was what I had pride in."

Pride. The sort of pride that gets stronger the more it resists authority. It must have been novel to come face to face with such

pride which dared to resist the will of a Blondy. Only a slumdog would have such pride.

"But since coming to Apatia... I thought it was meaningless to keep holding onto that. And when I'm with Iason, my head spins and I can't help it."

It dawned on Katze at last. The one who changed wasn't just Iason. It was Riki as well. "So you love him," Katze said matter of factly.

Riki lowered his eyes. "I don't know. I don't know if I hate him, or I don't, or if there's something else to it."

This side of Riki... this confession was new to Katze.

"I was afraid of the answer. Funny, isn't it? You can laugh if you want to."

It wasn't funny. Not at all.

This was a side of Riki that Iason... or Guy for that matter... did not know. It might be the first honest confession that Riki ever made in his life.

Or it might just be the sort of cowardice that only a situation like this could bring out in a man.

"Iason hates the sort of pet that follows him around, right?"

Katze knew. When he was Iason's furniture, no matter how much a pet tried to please Iason it had no effect. Even if it was the finest Academy purebred won at auction. To Iason, a pet was just a decoration, nothing more. As long as it didn't enter his line of sight, he was content. This was why Iason's obsession with Riki was inconceivable to Katze.

"Then all I have to do is never back down. And if I don't have the pet ring... then even if I can't stand head to head with Iason, I can maybe do that."

It was nothing but impossible.

The difference between a Blondy of Tanagura and a slumdog of Ceres was infinite. To even resist a Blondy the way Riki had was amazing. Only a slumdog exceptionally reckless could even look Iason in the eye to challenge him.

But maybe... Katze shook the thought from his head. There were other things to consider. Like the castration.

What Guy did was to spit on the bond between Master and Pet. Even if Riki forgave Guy, Iason would not. It was more than likely Guy would die.

"Where is that fucking idiot?" Katze asked.

"Dana-Burn."

Katze stared at Riki in amazement. "You mean that underground bunker from the independence era?"

Riki nodded. "I was in a room shielded against signals."

It was no surprise. Dana-Burn itself was constructed from military technology not of Tanagura. "No wonder we couldn't find you through tracking the pet ring."

Dana-Burn itself had such a reputation that even slumdogs avoided it at all costs. It was beyond the bounds of reason to guess they would be there. Which made Katze think: how did Guy think to use that location, and where did he get the blueprints?

Never mind that. What mattered most was here and now. "What did Guy go back there for?"

"To get something."

"Something that important?" Katze's innocent question jolted Riki.

Last night, Guy had been staring into his datalink, thinking and planning something. After the confrontation in Dana-Burn, Riki and Guy had stopped talking.

Guy was intent on doing something by himself. In Dana-Burn.

"And what will you do now?" Katze asked.

"I don't know."

Katze raised an eyebrow. "Then why did you contact me?"

"I... probably wanted you to stop Guy. Because nothing I say will get to him anymore."

Katze sighed. It was a bit much to stop someone so intent on suicide. But there was no stopping anything now.

I found something unusual in Midas. Black hair, black eyes, a slumdog with plenty of fight in him. Start taming him.

Iason's words were the start of it all.

No turning back now.

Katze needed to see things through to the end. That was the role he had to play. "Then let's get him before things get even worse. We'll talk after that."

Taking Katze's shoulder, Riki slowly rose up.

Chapter 13

The aerocar with Riki and Katze headed for Dana-Burn with all speed.

Where Katze got an aerocar was something not to be questioned. He was Scarface after all, connected to the underworld and to Eos.

Below, the Green Belt clawed at the ground.

"Where?" Katze asked.

"By the west end."

Before Katze stretched a forest of mined, abandoned buildings, waiting to crumble.

Without recollection of how he got there, and drugged for most of the time, Riki could only rely on a fragment of memory to retrace his steps. "There. That warehouse." Riki pointed at it.

Katze brought the aerocar to a halt before the solitary entrance.

"Wait here," Riki said.

"Are you okay?"

"I don't want him to react to you. I'll go alone."

"No, I'm asking about your condition." Riki looked pale. "I'll be alright," Riki said, forcing a smile. Katze didn't ask if it was bravado. He was right; if they both stepped in, Katze would no doubt get a hostile response from Guy. Guy would remember Katze from when Kirie was snatched out of Ceres.

"Don't do anything stupid," Katze spoke with concern. Between them there was now a shared bond, of having their manhood carved away from them.

"I'll be going now." Riki turned his gaze away and got out of the aerocar.

Through the entrance, down the slope. Riki remembered now. Guy used a trolley to get up the slope. It was gone. Did that mean he was down there still?

But there was no sign of Guy's aerobike outside. *Was he somewhere else?* Riki pondered.

He took a right, and the lights turned on in sequence as they detected his steps.

One. Two. Three. Four.

Somewhere here.

Katze's map showed an emergency lift in this vicinity. The switch wasn't immediately visible.

In the floor, there was a circular object. Riki slid it to one side. Recessed doors in the wall opened. *There.*

Riki put a front on it for Katze, but the truth was he could barely stand. All he wanted to do now was to know where he'd been imprisoned for the last ten days.

Underground. Third level. The lift stopped.

The orange hall lights lit the passageway. The air was cold and clawed at him. The ceiling, walls, floor felt like they were crushing in on him. As if they were *watching* him.

What am I afraid of? Riki gritted his teeth and stepped forward. As he moved down the passageway, the feeble lights behind him blinked off, one by one.

Straight, then... right at the intersection.

Riki saw the layout in his mind's eye. It was a skill that kept him alive in aerobike racing and navigating the slums, always finding a way to get somewhere, or a way to get out. It was what he did in Eos for the month of punishment he was walked around leashed. He remembered where everything was.

It was useful now in Dana-Burn.

As he passed the intersection, he was just about to step beyond it when he heard a scream. "Guy?" Riki's ears rang. Now he knew for certain Guy was here.

Why?

What?

Riki's blood froze.

There was no telling what just happened. Riki ran forward to the sound.

Where is he? Doubt and apprehension clawed at Riki. He stopped; his lungs struggled for breath. His legs shook. His gut wrenched. His crotch shot sharp pain into him over and over again. His lips quivered. Strength left him.

Dammit. Dammit! Dammit!

Riki wept in frustration. The door was a few meters away. He fell against the wall.

Then the sound of an explosion rocked the room beyond the door. The blast wave slammed into Riki.

What?

The tremor shook the hallway. The roar of the blast ricocheted down the passageways.

Riki's heart froze.

"Guy! Guy!"

He pounded on the door.

A voice from outside.

"... Riki?"

"Guy! Answer me!"

The voice was muffled by the door, but it was unmistakably Riki's. Iason vaulted to the door. The door was locked, access code disabled. Likely the emergency lever as well. It was Guy's intent all along to trap Iason here and to kill him. *And Riki as well?*

Iason glanced at Guy.

No, that must have been unexpected. Which meant this part of it was entirely unplanned.

Iason gripped the emergency lever and pulled with all his might.

Riki kept pounding on the door. "Guy! Guy!"

A wrenching, keening sound of metal bending came from the door. The door slowly opened.

Riki stood speechless. On the other side of the door was Iason.

He looked into Iason's hard stare and felt fear. Visceral, pounding fear. When Iason grabbed his arm, he recoiled and closed his eyes.

Nothing happened. All Riki could feel was his pulse quickening.

He opened his eyes slowly.

What?

The foundation of the building continued to shake. The walls, the ceiling started to slowly warp. Behind Iason was... Guy.

"Guy?"

Riki started to step forward. Iason blocked him and took Riki into his arms.



Riki wailed, "No. Why? Why?! You said you wouldn't touch him!"

Iason's voice was cold. "It serves him right. He tried to take my life along with his by bringing this structure down with explosives. The suicide was his choice."

Riki was bereft of words.

Explosives?

Suicide?

Who?

Guy?

Impossible.

But.

But...

To kill Iason? Why?

Lies.

There was no pet ring to bind Riki to Iason anymore. He should have been content with that. There was no meaning behind blowing up Dana-Burn to kill Iason.

No meaning at all.

Guy couldn't... *This had to be some sort of mistake.*

Riki's thoughts descended into panic.

"Riki, we are going. There is no time to waste." Taking Riki firmly in his arms, Iason stepped forward.

Riki struggled against Iason's embrace and shook his way free. "You go. I'm staying here."

Iason's lips quivered. Just once. He gripped Riki by the arm.

"Let go! Dammit! Let go!" Riki struggled and screamed. He kicked at Iason, bit his arm and clawed at him. Knowing it was futile, Riki then clutched at him. "I... I'm the one who seduced him. He didn't want me. It was all my fault."

The sound of the building warping, foundations cracking did not enter Riki's ears. "He's not dead, right? Please. Help him!" Riki begged Iason. "I'll do anything. Just don't leave him here!"

Iason's voice was steel. "He matters to you that much?" There was not even a hint of irony in the question. Iason was deathly serious.

"Don't say that!" Riki screamed. "We're the ones that brought this on him, Iason. You and me!" It was undeniable. "He might be a slumdog to you, but to me he's family. We grew up together under the Guardians. If I leave him behind, I'm nothing. I can't live with myself."

The words came from Riki's heart.

In the Guardians, from the ages of six through twelve, Riki had family in the same age group. Being of different genetic lineage didn't matter to them. There were eight of them, all the family Riki ever wanted.

But fate was unkind. Of the four males, now only Riki survived. The four females were sequestered in breeding programs, never to be seen again.

Riki was alone. Then Guy came into his life.

Guy was more than a lover, he was the reason Riki was alive in Ceres. Riki couldn't abandon Guy. What he did... was something else.

Iason stared hard at Riki.

And nodded.

"Go first."

"I'll..."

"You would not make it. Go. Now."

Riki walked slowly down the passageway and stood his ground. It wasn't that he doubted Iason, but he couldn't put all this on Iason.

The tremors increased.

All Riki could do was wait.

Iason appeared, Guy over his shoulder like a satchel, "He is still alive. It appears slumdogs are resilient."

They stepped forward, the ground shaking beneath them. Riki tried to keep his footing. The roar of another explosion sounded in the distance. Riki put his hands against the wall.

Iason turned to look at him.

Riki gave a wan smile. *I'll be fine. Keep going.*

Iason set forth again. Riki's face contorted in pain. Every few meters Riki slumped against the wall to catch his breath.

The cargo lift was useless. That left only an upward slope past the blast shutter.

Riki wondered if he could make it. But he had to try. Katze was waiting somewhere. He could hope. *All I have to do is not quit.* He wiped the sweat off his face and stepped forward.

A deafening roar filled the passageway and slammed Riki to the ground. Rising in pain, he looked up in fear. The walls started to crack, then the ceiling. Fragments came crumbling down. Klaxons sounded throughout the the passageway. The dust and sounds assailed his senses.

"Riki!" A hand struck his cheek and he came to.

Iason.

Riki had no time to think of Guy. He held onto Iason. The world warped around him.

The slope was right there in front of them. The blast shutter warped. Its support beams screeched and twisted down.

No.

The thought crossed Riki's mind for a moment before he felt himself hurled into the air—no, thrown.

A thud, a lash of pain across his body.

His world went dark.

Riki was being shaken awake, his body wrapped in pain. His eyeballs were on fire. The world was a haze of red.

Iason's calm voice. "Riki. Answer."

"Yeah, I'm here." Riki struggled to rise. The passageway was collapsed, the shutter mangled and stabbing into the floor.

"Can you move?"

"Yeah." Riki got to his feet. "Let's go, Iason. No sense staying around." Small aftershocks made themselves felt. Iason sat against the wall, unmoving.

"What are you doing, Iason? Let's go, we don't have..."

The words stopped in Riki's throat.

It wasn't that Iason didn't want to stand.

He couldn't.

"You're kidding me."

Iason's right leg was twisted off at the ankle; his left shorn at the thigh. Metallic bone left a polished gleam exposed, with blue blood dripping from the wounds.

Riki couldn't speak. Iason protected him and this was the cost. Riki's

lips shook.

Iason spoke calmly. "Guy is on the top of the slope." The voice was that of a Blondy. Without fear, without denial.

Their eyes met.

Iason spoke. "Go. There is no time."

Riki knew Iason expected nothing.

But...

No.

He couldn't.

Time moved implacably forward.

Riki was on his feet from sheer force of will alone. Carrying two was out of the question, maybe one. If Riki had to choose, he'd save Guy. Iason knew this.

"Go."

Riki bit down on his lip and turned to walk, dragging himself up the slope.

He felt Iason's gaze on him. He didn't turn around. If he turned around he could never walk forward again. He knew that.

As Iason said, Guy was there at the top of the slope. Like a rag doll, unmoving. He was heavy. Just lifting him up took the breath out of him.

Half carrying, half dragging, Riki stepped forward. His joints screamed in agony.

He didn't have time to feel the pain.

Riki kept on moving forward. Whether Guy was alive or dead, he

didn't have time to check and the thought never crossed his mind. All that mattered was taking Guy out of there.

One step, then another.

Time blurred and ceased to have meaning.

Katze's face came into view. Katze screamed something. Riki couldn't hear—

And then Katze's hand struck him across the face. Stars exploded across his eyes. "Riki! Riki!" Katze's voice exploded into clarity.

The strength left Riki's legs.

"Riki! Get up. What was that explosion?"

"Take... take Guy."

"Alright. Stay here. Don't pass out."

"I can't... need to... do something."

"Later!"

"If... Guy can be... saved... change... his face... wipe his memory."

"What are you saying? Give me your hand."

"Iason... is still back there."

Katze paused. "What?!" He grabbed Riki by the shirt.

"Guy... wanted to... blow this place up... on top of him and Iason."

Katze went pale.

"Iason... saved me... I can't... lift him."

"So you left him behind?" Katze's voice was low with suppressed rage.

"Going... back. Not... letting... him die... alone."

Katze took a deep breath. "Are you serious?"

Riki nodded. "Iason could have... escaped... alone. But he... saved Guy, me... that's enough for me to go back."

Iason's first and last act of compassion.

"Go... you'll get caught... in this too."

It was a waste of time trying to argue. Katze drew his cigarette case from his breast pocket and gave it to Riki. "Black Moons."

A powerful narcotic, with a reputation for being used for suicide. Riki knew Katze was a heavy smoker but had no idea he was carrying these. It was a last favor from Katze.

"It'll be painless."

Ah.

Riki gave a wan smile and nodded.

Katze took Guy on his shoulder and walked to the aerocar. Not a single look back. Just like Katze.

Riki watched the aerocar ascend into the sky and started back down the passageway.

There was nothing left now. Somehow, it made his steps lighter.

Iason lay in the darkness. .

Concern did not mar his features nor his ethereal beauty.

When Riki walked into view, Iason stared at him in stunned silence.

"Riki?"

There was nothing else to say. Riki saw the expression of astonishment on Iason's face and laughed. "Hey, you're making me blush."

Iason didn't ask why. He gazed at Riki in disbelief.

"You're bored... right? I'm here to keep you company." He sat down next to Iason. The wall buckled. He gave it no thought. "If I talk too much, let me know. I can be quiet." Riki was never this familiar with Iason, who looked on him with mute astonishment.



The air turned to gentle silence.

Now it was all clear.

The truth of it all.

The foundation continued to crack and buckle. There wasn't much time. Riki drew two cigarettes from the case. The Black Moons had different colored filters. "Want one?"

Iason didn't ask where they came from.

"A last cigarette between the two of us. Not a shabby way to go."

Iason took a cigarette between his lips as Riki lit it.

The flame flickered.

A whisper of smoke rose in the air.

Riki took the other cigarette in his lips and lit it on the end of Iason's.

As if it was a last, deep kiss between them.

They inhaled in silence. The bitter smoke flowed into them, to become the sweetest taste.

Explosions and tremors rocked the world around them.

Iason took Riki into his arms, everything unspoken between them. Riki smiled gently, his head against Iason's chest, and closed his eyes.

The dying light of the sun flickered on the horizon.

With a defiant roar, Dana-Burn collapsed.

Chapter 14

That same day.

Everyone in Ceres walked the streets in disbelief.

The explosion rocked all of Midas. It was as if the world had ended.

While Midas would have looked on the destruction of Ceres with smug satisfaction, being closest to the epicenter, Harvey was also in ruins.

That Harvey was off-limits to tourists was the only thing that kept casualties low. Each Area of Midas activated shields that limited the damage to the rest of the city.

The lights of Midas shone on, lusterless.

The priority call came to Katze about thirty minutes after he delivered Guy into the hands of a nanosurgeon. Katze's expression was grim. There was no time to think, much less prepare for this. But there was no choice but to answer the call.

The men who worked for Katze were nervous and uncertain. Katze understood. Dana-Burn had collapsed; and so had part of their world.

Katze stepped into a secure room and waved the holochannel open.

Raoul's fierce countenance filled the center of the room. Katze felt a chill of fear and a sensation like years of his life slipping away. Raoul got straight to the point. "Iason is nowhere to be found. Where is he?"

"My Lord, we have not received instructions from him," Katze replied with a straight face.

"He gave no word of his destination?"

"No, Lord Raoul." It actually was the truth.

This is a private matter. Leave yourself out of it.

To defy Iason was impossible for Katze. Were it not so, Katze would have rounded up all of Bison for interrogation the moment Riki disappeared.

In the end, it was best that he did not. Because he wouldn't have been able to resist Raoul's questioning otherwise.

"Then know that your Master went to Harvey."

"What?" Katze raised his eyes in astonishment. It wasn't just an act; it was genuine.

Was it a smokescreen?

Raoul continued "1412, Departure from Rivas. 1442, Arrival at Harvey. That is the time log we have. He used the Karaza network." The Karaza network was a secret known to exceptionally few. Raoul was aware that as Iason's representative for all matters related to Ceres, Katze knew of it.

So he used the Karaza network.

Raoul broke the silence. "So what business did Iason have in Harvey?"

"My Lord, he made no mention of it to me."

Raoul's voice cracked like a whip. "Stop lying. His movements in public are known to all of us. But those in private are your purview."

What?

"Iason thought that highly of you, to place you in his trust."

Katze was bereft of speech. His stomach wrenched.

Raoul's words continued to lash him. "I will not hear of your denial.

This is a critical matter. You already understand what state Harvey is in. If you continue to lie to me, I will put you under interrogation and shred your mind until I have the truth."

Katze paled, knowing it was no idle threat. Raoul would do so without hesitation. Even among the Blondies, Raoul was known to be absolutely ruthless.

"I want to know why Iason left for Harvey and where he is. Now." Raoul's gaze from the holodisplay carried the promise of unlimited suffering from his cybernetic eyes. Katze knew he couldn't lie to Raoul. No tricks would work here.

Raoul's voice dropped. "Do not tell me that he is involved in that explosion in Dana-Burn."

Katze looked up startled.

Raoul went silent for a moment. And then his eyes burned with renewed intensity. "Tell me everything. *Now.*"

The command instilled fear in Katze. It was a different sort of aura from Iason, whose voice was like ice. Raoul's voice carried across like hellfire. Katze swallowed. And then he resolved to tell the truth. Without conjecture or personal opinion.

He told Raoul the chronology of events over the last ten days. From Riki's disappearance to the explosion at Dana-Burn. Everything except the fact that Guy was alive.

Raoul's face hardened into a mask.

There was no better scientist in the known worlds than Raoul, no better hand at nanosurgery. But even he knew the limits to immortality that Blondies inherited from Jupiter.

That Guy risked everything to free Riki and kill Iason by destroying all of Dana-Burn stretched credulity. But for Iason to protect Riki, a slumdog—a *pet*—and die in the process was unimaginable.

But Raoul... Raoul said not a word to interrupt Katze.

Katze shook to think of the consequences. But it was clear that this truth would never surface. Tanagura demanded it so. To protect the legacy, the name of Iason Mink.

There was no doubt as to what course of action Raoul Am would take for Iason.

Raoul commanded in a fiery voice: "Keep your silence."

With that the holodisplay went dark.

Midas. 2210 hours.

Katze was beyond the point of exhaustion when he entered his quarters.

His legs shook, his consciousness hazed over. He slumped into his recliner and reached for the cigarette case in his breast pocket.

He came to, remembering he gave it to Riki.

He reached into the desk drawer instead and drew out a fresh pack, tapping a cigarette out. Katze lit it and inhaled.

The embers flickered.

The smoke rose.

Unchanging.

His throat started shaking. Tears fell from his eyes. It was so unexpected that Katze tried to swat them away but they continued to fall. No matter how hard he tried to fight it down, he wept.

Biting down on his lips, overwhelmed by emotion, Katze covered his mouth with his hands.

And wept.

Epilogue

It was like the mist was clinging to his eyes.

Try as he may, he couldn't shake it from his sight.

Not knowing what to feel or how to feel, Guy opened his eyes. But they saw nothing.

Not knowing if this was real, the eyes drifted.

And then, unbidden, a drop.

And another. And another.

Where am I?

The pristine room was lit with a soft glow. Not a mark on the walls, the air was clean, unlike Ceres. The scene put Guy at unease.

Why am I here?

The recollections fell across Guy's consciousness like a thunderclap.

The memory of Iason's furious gaze gripped his chest. His heart tightened, and a sharp crushing pain descended on his left arm. Guy knew it was just a memory but he broke out in a cold sweat. Guy clenched his left fist. It felt heavy.

I'm here. Alive.

Guy tried to move his left arm.

Nothing.

He looked toward it and saw an empty space.

Why?

Guy patted his side with his other arm in desperation.

The memories came back. The fear, the hatred, the pain. All of it. Guy had already resolved to die with Iason. But he was alive. Broken. Crippled.

The bitter laughter overflowed from his lips.

Next day.

Katze entered the room unannounced.

Guy gave a start. *Scarface*. He sat up.

The only time they'd come close to meeting before was when Katze came to collect Kirie in the raid on Ceres. The scar on his face played across the inorganic beauty of his features. This was the first time Guy saw it up close.

Katze broke the silence. "I think you know who I am."

Guy nodded.

"We couldn't save your left arm. The nanosurgeon said your will to live was remarkable. You must have some will to live. Or..."

Guy snapped, "Get on with it. I know what I did. I picked a fight with a Blondy and lost. Do what you want with me." There were questions that clawed at Guy. What of Riki, or Iason?

"Do what?" Katze asked.

"Wait... you came to take me in, right?"

Katze said angrily, "I brought you here from Dana-Burn myself."

"What?"

"Because that was Riki's last wish."

Guy paused. "... Last wish?"

"That's right."

Riki?

How?

Why?

Guy didn't understand.

Katze told Guy the story. Everything that happened. Everything he'd told Raoul, and more. Guy needed to know what he did. The consequences of leading Iason and Riki to their deaths. Katze was not going to be his executioner, but he would bear witness.

Iason Mink was dead.

As Guy planned it, Dana-Burn was his tomb.

But for Riki as well.

The tomb would never be marked with their names. The world would never know.

The official story behind the collapse was structural failure. That was the report issued in Midas, and Ceres. Raoul saw to that. From Tanagura, not a word or mention of the disaster.

Guy froze in disbelief.

"No... no... no."

Katze's voice cut deep. "No what—that Riki chose Iason over you at the end? Or that you destroyed Harvey as well and every human being in it?" He continued ruthlessly, "Losing your left arm is hardly enough for what you've done."

Staring into Katze's burning eyes, Guy had no response.

"Riki said if you lived through it, for me to change your face, wipe your mind and let you live another life. That's Riki trying to look out for you till the very end. But if you went into this putting your life on the line, then you should *live* it."

Guy gritted his teeth.

"Life is nothing but scars, one after the other. Think about how those two died. Then if you want to get your mind wiped, come find me. At any rate, you're dead as far as the official record is concerned, so you'll need to put your face under nanosurgery. You're alive. You decide."

Guy's head hurt. His veins wanted to burst.

But he had no tears. As if that part of him that could cry was broken forever.

Dana-Burn.

Guy walked through the ruins turned tomb, alone.

Here, Riki and Iason rested. Only a few would ever know.

Guy paused for a thought. To remember Katze's words.

Do you know what ai no kusabi means? It's an ancient term, it means something that binds two things together.

It's impossible to live without someone else. That's what Riki wanted to say. But at the very end of it all, Riki gave Guy to Katze and chose to die with Iason.

The Blondy and the Ceres slumdog. It was as if Iason was a box of secrets, and Riki was the only key that could open him. So it was Master and Pet, that sort of twisted, unequal relationship that defined them. *It might be that they could only live by pitting their pride against each other. Maybe it was predestined that way.*

Predestined.

To Guy, meeting Riki was that.

The elation of knowing him. Riki sustained Guy, gave him a reason to exist. It wasn't coincidence they met. To Guy it was fate.

But Katze put the lie to that.

It might break your heart, but there is love that can only be expressed the way they lived it.

Love.

Guy tasted the bitterness of that word. The left arm he no longer had flared in pain. He clutched at the empty sleeve. Katze's words faded away.

Between those of us left, there is nothing left to share. The only certainty is that we are the only ones who can speak of not just how they died, but how they lived.

Life. "Oh I'll live. Left arm or not. I have all the time in the world now."

Riki.

Guy kept that name within his heart.

In secret.

With all the emotion left in his soul.

It was then—

A gust of wind rushed across the earth and swept past Guy's long hair.

Afterword

Wow, it's over.

I'm so relieved I am writing this afterword. It's already the end of the year... wow. It was like living in deadline hell (ha ha). That I spent the last year working on the conclusion of *Ai no Kusabi* is unbelievable.

And I'm already starting to ramble!

Greetings everyone, this is *Ai no Kusabi*, vol. 8. The preceding volumes ended up being for the permanent editions, so I think this rewrite has taken up so many pages (or maybe that's how it always is, hee hee).

I've added quite a bit to this final volume, but that entire part where Dana-Burn collapses, I was wondering the whole time if I was rushing through it because I wanted to write that final scene between Iason and Riki (hee hee).

Well, this time around for the permanent edition I ended up doing this rewrite not under *BL* but under *JUNÉ*. I remember the good old days when I had so much more leeway (hee hee). Well, even if things change, my imagination is still totally uncontrollable (ha ha).

Looking back on the entire series, I think what I'm happiest about most of all is the chance to have penned so many different kinds of characters. Especially in this permanent edition, where I got to devote so much more time to Raoul and the other Blondies. And that was with the additional pleasure of listening to the audio versions and having my image of their conversations refine themselves, hee hee.

Aside from Iason and Riki, my favorite character is actually the long-suffering Katze. After that is Lavi, though he didn't have too much time in these pages. Whether it's Riki, Katze or Lavi, they each had trauma in their lives they had to overcome, and the differences in the pain they carried is what I like about them.

Guy is, well, out of all the characters the most normal and well-adjusted (ha ha). At the very end he became such an obsessive egoist, but his feelings of love are the clearest to understand and the most normal... What, you don't agree?

But he's the gentle former boyfriend who looks at this insurmountable wall keeping him from his beloved and says he'll tear it down. And he's so brazen the whole way through it. Isn't that passion or what? Out of all the characters in this series he's the easiest to understand, I think, regardless of how you feel about him.

Well, if this was a typical romance novel then "the villain" (ha ha) would end up dying and the protagonists would end up happily ever after in love, but for Iason and Riki that was probably the only ending they could really have... love after all comes in many forms. I think it's a happy ending myself, but I wonder how you all feel about it?

But if I tried to write a new story like this today, it would probably never get picked up. So that's why I'm with *JUNÉ* (ha ha).

When I was thinking to myself about what the difference between *BL* and *JUNÉ* is, *JUNÉ* is like the one place where I can just write anything and everything that runs through my head. It's kind of like the ultimate self-indulgence. After all, I can submit the draft but I have no idea whether it will get picked up or not. It's like gambling (ha ha). But I have to say that I have a great deal of energy with that. And also, *BL* puts an editor on you from the outset, which is more commercial-minded.

But it's over! Well, this series anyways. Then there's this, that and the other... (hee hee). I have plenty to write about but it all depends on scheduling.

Well, as for the OVA, you've already seen it, right? It was so beautiful, such high quality. It's so amazing that anime can do things now that wouldn't have been thought of not too long ago. The director's passion is that of the entire crew behind the production.

As for me, during the pre-production meeting the director asked,

"Do we need a nipple here?" I replied, "Yes! It's absolutely essential!" That scene (you know which one) is the result... and it was so erotic (hee hee). The audio version is down with Volume 2 now, but it's moving along nicely.

Anyway, it's the end, and I'm so sorry to drag this along, but Mr. Saichi Nagato, thank you for your beautiful illustrations for this entire series (low bow). I know I'm persistent, but if you have the time, please do an illustration with the entire Blondie cast in one frame (again, low bow).

Till next time.

Rieko Yoshihara

December 2009